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Exploring coaches' perceptions of the role of trauma in sport success

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Exploring Coaches' Perceptions of the Role of Trauma in Sport Success

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One of the coaches that I interviewed for this dissertation said that “Success in sport is not a drive-thru window.” Besides being beautifully quippy, this quote reminded me that the process of obtaining a doctorate degree, like the process of becoming an elite athlete, requires a lot of patience, hard work, perseverance, and of course, a lot of support.

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ABSTRACT

Recent research examining the antecedents to success in elite sport have led to claims that trauma is necessary to reach the highest levels of sport. Researchers have utilized theories of post-traumatic growth, stress-related growth, and related terms to elucidate the relationship between trauma and sport success, but have been inconsistent in how they define trauma and growth. The purpose of this study was to explore coaches' perceptions regarding the relationship between trauma and sport success and how their perceptions may influence their coaching behaviors. An interpretivist phenomenological analysis framework was utilized for the study design and analysis. Ten NCAA Division I coaches were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Six themes and 10 subthemes emerged from the data analysis: (a) the relationship between trauma and sport is nuanced; (b) coaching philosophy influences how coaches view the relationship between trauma and sport success; (c) hard things, including trauma, adversity, and challenge, are inevitable; (d) trauma is intense, more so than obstacles/challenges/adversity; (e) hard things lead to growth and development; and (f) hard things are not sufficient for growth; other pieces to the puzzle are needed. Coaches largely indicated that trauma is not necessary for athletic success, but that it is important to experience challenges to develop skills needed for athletic success. The coaches provided examples and context for when and how challenging things lead to success, indicating that there is a great deal of nuance in how trauma and hard things influence success. This study has implications for how coaches and sport organizations thoughtfully impact athlete well-being and success.

Chapter 1

Introduction

It is quite common for people to be in awe of individuals who have risen to the top of some performance domain. People who are great artists, politicians, intellectuals, and athletes are admired. Along with this admiration comes the question of how did these individuals become so good at what they do? Research into this very topic reveals that certain personal characteristics, as well as life circumstances, help propel these individuals into success (Baker, Wattie, Schorer, 2019). However, at the center of this research is a debate about what kind of life experiences are necessary to promote success. Some research suggests that trauma is necessary for talent development (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2017; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015), while other research argues that factors like personality traits, levels of grit or resilience, as well as physical talent, contribute more to talent development (Hodges, Ford, Hendry, & Williams, 2017; Krakauer, 2017). The process of how negative life events, such as trauma, drive success in performance domains has been the subject of much research.

Prior Research into the Relationship between Trauma and Success in Sport

One study that attempted to answer this question was conducted by Hardy, Barlow, Evans, Rees, Woodman, and War (2017). Hardy et al. demonstrated how the facilitative impact of negative life experiences coupled with a positive sporting experience could help create elite athletes. This study was part of a larger research study examining the differences between elite athletes and super-elite athletes. Elite athletes were defined as athletes who competed at the international level and were funded by a sport governing body but who had not medaled. In contrast, super-elite athletes were

defined as serial medalists at international competitions. Through interviews with athletes, parents, and coaches, Hardy et al. noted important differences between the elite and super-elite athletes. The most salient finding was that super-elite athletes experienced a negative life event at a greater frequency than elite athletes, such as parental divorce, death of a loved one, an unstable home life, physical and verbal abuse, or bullying. Importantly, these negative life events temporally were coupled with a positive sporting event such as discovering a new talent in sport or feeling connected to teammates and coaches. Drawing from attachment theory, Hardy et al. posited that the negative life event increased a sense of loss which drove these individuals to have a high need to succeed, and subsequently, develop other traits associated with high performance, such as ruthlessness, selfishness, obsessiveness, and perfectionism. Additionally, Hardy et al. conjectured that super-elite athletes develop a counterphobic attitude and are motivated to put themselves in high pressure situations that elite sport offers. Hardy et al. went so far as to claim a causal link between early life negative events and later success in sport, citing the development of personal characteristics due to trauma that propels success. While they note that they do not believe trauma is necessary, as there are multiple pathways to the same end, they nevertheless describe a process that links trauma to later sport success at the Olympic level.

This study highlights several important aspects about the relationship between trauma and success in sport. Hardy et al. make the claim that experiencing negative life events creates characteristics that are necessary to achieve in sport at the highest levels. Other researchers have agreed, citing the need for athletes to develop skills and resilience to handle the challenges that come with training (Collins & MacNamara, 2012; John,

Gropper, & Theil, 2019; Kegelaers & Wylleman, 2017; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2017;). However, there is a debate within the field about the nuances of the relationship between negative life events and sport success. For instance, some researchers believe it is important to consider the type of negative life event, how many negative life events, and when these negative life events occur developmentally (Collins, MacNamara, McCarthy, 2016a, 2016b; Den Hartigh, Van Yperen, & Van Geert, 2017; Gucciardi, 2017). Furthermore, several researchers have noted that trauma and negative life events may only be one pathway to Olympic-level success and other factors, such as devotion to practice, grit, type of motivation, and systemic factors (e.g., type of sport, funding for sport) also contribute to success in sport (Hodges, Ford, Hendry, & Williams, 2017; Jones & Wilson, 2017; John, Gropper, & Theil, 2019; Krakauer, 2017).

The Role of Posttraumatic Growth in the Trauma-Sport Success Relationship

One construct that may shed light onto the nuances of the relationship between trauma and success in sport is posttraumatic growth (Gucciardi, 2017). Post-traumatic growth is defined as "positive psychological changes experienced as the result of the struggle with major life crises or traumatic events" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). Posttraumatic growth can be a useful framework for determining the nuances of the process from experiencing trauma to becoming an elite athlete, and there are several theories that provide structure to this process (Joseph & Linley, 2004; Joseph, Murphy, & Regel, 2012; Maercker & Zoellner, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Broadly, individuals who experience posttraumatic growth find that their views about themselves and the world change, their life philosophies change, and their relationships with others are enhanced (Joseph & Linley, 2005). Posttraumatic growth has been linked to a variety

of positive outcomes, and sport has been shown to facilitate growth in these areas (Howells, Sarkar, & Fletcher, 2017). In a systematic review, Howells et al. (2017) found that many studies researching PTG in sport highlighted the importance of sport in helping athletes reestablish identity, feel empowered, and provide safe spaces and relationships.

Research of posttraumatic growth in sport spaces has been challenging due to several reasons. First, there is an indiscriminate use of terms to describe negative life events. Terms such as trauma, adversity, challenge, stressors, and many more have been used to describe life events that may lead to posttraumatic growth (Howells et al., 2017). These terms all have slightly different meanings relative to the intensity of the negative life event and do not allow for nuance. Furthermore, there are many terms to describe the process of healing, such as posttraumatic growth, stress-related growth, growth following adversity, and others (Howells et al., 2017). Since there is little consistency among researchers' use of these terms, it can be difficult to understand the nuances of the relationship between trauma and sport success, which if not considered carefully may have detrimental impacts on sport policy and coaching behaviors (Collins et al., 2016b).

The Role of Coaches in the Trauma-Sport Success Relationship

One important piece of the relationship between trauma and sport success is the role of the coach. Within the sporting world, coaches provide a significant amount of social support to their athletes, and the quality of the coach-athlete relationship has many implications for motivation, performance, and athlete well-being (Davis & Jowett, 2010). A central part to many theories of posttraumatic growth is the importance of social support, and the role of social support in posttraumatic growth is twofold. First, positive relationships can help individuals who have experienced trauma heal (Joseph & Linley,

2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Second, research cites the importance of social support as a protective factor for experiencing potentially traumatic events (Howard Sharp, Schwartz, Barnes, Jamison, Miller-Graff, & Howell, 2017). Coaches are often main sources of support for athletes, and athletes often see their coaches as attachment figures, meaning they look for support from coaches during times of stress (Davis & Jowett, 2010).

However, coaches also can be the source of stress and trauma, particularly coaches who engage in behaviors such as emotional, physical, and sexual abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2015). Emotional abuse, in particular, has been normalized in athletics, with coaches and athletes believing that it is necessary at times to increase performance (Stirling & Kerr, 2015). Furthermore, as athletes increase in skill level, the time spent with their coaches as well as the pressure to perform at high levels also increases, leaving them vulnerable to experiencing more emotional abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2015. On the other hand, for some athletes, spending more time with a coach can be a stable and protective relationship that increases their ability to cope with stressors (Davis & Jowett, 2010). Because coaches can serve in many different capacities for the well-being of athletes, it is important to have an understanding of how coaches conceptualize trauma, challenges, and stressors and how they view their role on the spectrum of protecting from and providing challenge and stressors for athletes. Inevitably, their beliefs about how negative life events impact sport success will impact their own approach to coaching.

Purpose of Current Study

To that end, the purpose of the current study will be to explore coaches' perceptions of the relationship between trauma and sport success and how they view their

role in facilitating this process. Due to the lack of consistency in terminology and use of theories in exploring this relationship as well as important related constructs like posttraumatic growth, the aim of this research is to add nuance to the debate about the relationship between trauma and sport success as understood through the lived experiences of those most impacted by this relationship. Furthermore, the present study will attempt to reveal how perceptions of the relationship between trauma and sport success already are influencing how coaches train, develop, and relate to their athletes. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide valuable information for researchers and applied practitioners for guiding coaches, athletes, parents, and other stakeholders in how best to care for the overall well-being of athletes.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The following literature review provides deeper conceptual explanations for trauma, posttraumatic growth, and the study of these concepts as they are related to talent development in athletes. To begin, what trauma is and how it impacts human functioning will be described. Then, posttraumatic growth will be discussed, and several theories will be outlined to provide a framework for how those who have experienced trauma go on to experience positive changes in their lives. In particular, the utility of the Organismic Valuing Theory (OVT; Joseph & Linley, 2005) of posttraumatic growth in delineating the process of how trauma may or may not lead to posttraumatic growth will be reviewed. Next, how these concepts have been studied in sport and the challenges and criticisms that have been levied toward this endeavor will be debated. Finally, the complex role of coaches as source and protector from trauma and how this impacts sport success will be considered.

Trauma and Human Functioning

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA; 2019a) defines trauma as "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being." Those who experience trauma are more likely to experience poor psychological outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Martin, Cromer, DePrince, & Freyd, 2013). According to SAMSHA (2019a), approximately 61 percent of males and 51 percent of females

experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetime. These high prevalence rates make it likely that athletes will experience at least one traumatic even in their lifetime.

Symptoms of trauma may occur immediately following the traumatic experience or may have a delayed onset. Symptoms can impact the emotional, physical, behavioral, cognitive and relational aspects of functioning. Symptoms may include emotional dysregulation, emotional numbing, changes in sleep and eating habits, hyperarousal, memory problems, difficulty concentrating, rumination, self-blame, and intrusive memories, among others (SAMSHA, 2019b). In studies with athletes, trauma symptoms that have been described include isolation, lost confidence, suicidal ideation, and questioning their identity as an athlete (Tamminen, Holt, Neely, 2012).

Most people who experience trauma may experience these symptoms at sub-clinical levels that last for a short period of time (SAMSHA, 2019b). However, there is research that shows the relationship between childhood trauma and the impacts that carry on into adulthood. One such study examined how multiple traumas that occur in childhood may lead to more severe and complex PTSD symptoms in adulthood (Cloitre, Stolbach, Herman, van der Kolk, Pynoos, Wang, & Petkova, 2009). These researchers also found that trauma occurring in adulthood was less likely to result in symptoms that have the same intensity and complexity than when trauma occurs in childhood, an important consideration for talent development in sport.

Certain factors may impact the intensity and duration of symptoms related to experiencing trauma. Factors such as type of trauma, length of trauma (chronic vs. single-event), age at which trauma was experienced, and personal characteristics (e.g., level of resilience) may influence how one responds to trauma (Pat-Horenczyk, Kenan, Achituv,

& Bachar, 2014; van der Kolk, Roth, Pelcovitz, Sunday, Spinazzola, 2005). While research is delineating the process that determines whether or not someone will experience deleterious effects on functioning and well-being due to trauma, it is still difficult to predict how trauma may impact any one individual. Another research avenue that is helping to answer these questions is the research on posttraumatic growth.

Theories Describing the Trauma-Posttraumatic Growth Relationship

There have been a variety of theories describing the relationship between trauma and postraumatic growth. According to a systematic review conducted by Howells et al., (2017), there appears to be four theories that are used most frequently in sport research. These theories are the Posttraumatic Growth Functional Descriptive Model of Posttraumatic Growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), Janus-Faced Model of Posttraumatic Growth (Maercker & Zoellner, 2004), Organismic Valuing Theory (Joseph and Linley, 2005), and Affective-Cognitive Processing Model of Posttraumatic Growth (Joseph, Murphy, & Regel 2012). While none of these theories are specific to sport, they have been applied to varieties of sports and challenges, including injury, physical illness, mental health, interpersonal struggles including abuse and relationship dysfunction, performance issues, and general adjustment concerns (Howells et al., 2017). Each model describes the process of growth following trauma, and there are similarities as well as distinctions between each model.

Functional Descriptive Model of Posttraumatic Growth.

Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) Functional Descriptive Model of Posttraumatic Growth theorizes that trauma occurs when one's basic assumptions are shattered and growth is the process of rebuilding and integrating new schemas all while dealing with

stressful emotions. The authors make important distinctions about the type and duration of cognitive and emotional processing that must occur to facilitate growth. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), intrusive thoughts and rumination are symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. Tedeschi and Calhoun theorized that intrusive thoughts may be a sign of growth because it is necessary to grapple with the meaning of the event. They suggest that when intrusive thoughts are thought about in a way that involves focusing on making sense of the event, problem solving or anticipating future events, the process of growth can occur. Furthermore, Tedeschi and Calhoun emphasize the importance of social support in the growth process and suggest the use of groups can be instrumental, particularly when the social support can tolerate emotional distress that comes with trauma, and the support is stable and consistent over time.

Janus-Faced Model of Posttraumatic Growth

The Janus-Faced Model of Posttraumatic Growth (Maercker & Zoellner, 2004) is very similar to the functional descriptive model offered by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), but adds the concept of illusory growth. Maercker and Zoellner posited that initial reactions to trauma may be self-deceptive beliefs that people use to help them cope with the trauma. These self-deceptions may lead people to believe they have grown through the trauma, but actual changes in behavior have not occurred. Maercker and Zollener do not believe illusory growth is problematic, as long as individuals do not get stuck in this phase of growth. Howells and Sarkar (2016) found evidence of illusory growth in a sample of swimmers, indicated by vague or unclear descriptions of growth not linked to specific behaviors and typically occurring in the earlier phases of the growth process.

These researchers, too, posited that illusory growth is an important part of the growth process that can lead to later constructive growth.

Organismic Valuing Theory/Affective-Cognitive Processing Model of Posttraumatic Growth

Joseph and Linley's (2005) Organismic Valuing Theory (OVT) appears to be the most comprehensive theory on growth following trauma. OVT shares assumptions with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) and the autonomy-supportive coaching model (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003) as well. Self-determination theory and the autonomy-supportive coaching model are used extensively in sport to explain athlete motivation and its related constructs, which make OVT a particularly appealing theory to use when studying posttraumatic growth in sport.

In their seminal paper, Joseph and Linley made the argument that a theory of growth also must account for the research conducted when growth does not occur, such as in cases of posttraumatic stress, in addition to accounting for the characteristics of growth. Furthermore, a theory also must be able to take into account research examining correlates and predictors of growth. Their social-cognitive model blends important parts of other theories on trauma and growth and explains why some people grow after trauma and others do not and how the process of growth occurs.

OVT is based on the assumption that humans are inherently driven toward growth and there is a basic need to consolidate one's experience with their sense of self. Another assumption made by OVT is that people are naturally inclined toward acting in their own best self-interest that will promote psychological well-being. These assumptions inform the organismic valuing process, which occurs when people listen to their internal drive to

do what is best for themselves and allow for an authentic version of themselves to emerge. Joseph and Linley (2005) make it clear that a trauma is something that shatters previously held beliefs about the world and is most likely to occur in situations that lead to perception of life threat, uncontrollability, and helplessness. When trauma occurs, individuals must incorporate their traumatic experiences into a new sense of self that still feels authentic. This process is called positive accommodation and requires a changed world view that promotes growth. For example, a changed world view that may promote growth is "bad things may happen, but I'm in control of my reaction."

OVT outlines different variables that can stop the organismic valuing process from occurring. Some people may not be aware of or listen to their organismic valuing process. People who have not had their psychological needs of competency, autonomy, and relatedness met may be more vulnerable to not listening to their organismic valuing process. Similar to the functional descriptive model, for positive accommodation of trauma experiences to occur one needs to find meaning rather than simply understanding what has happened to them. When meaning is not made and only an understanding happens, it is called assimilation, which does not result in the necessary change in life philosophies associated with growth to occur. Additionally, growth will not occur if world views change in a negative direction. For example, if someone experiencing a trauma changes their world view to "the world is a dangerous place," this may lead to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

The Affective-Cognitive Processing Model (Joseph et al., 2012) extends OVT and provides a detailed model about how trauma information is processed and introduces an emotion component. This model acknowledges the importance of the subjective appraisal

of the trauma and the subsequent emotional response. Depending on the type of emotional response, coping strategies will be put into place. If the coping strategies are helpful, a new appraisal will occur about the individual's ability to handle adversity, and growth can occur. However, if the coping strategies are not helpful, new appraisals will be made about the inability of the individual to handle adversity, leading to helplessness and hopelessness.

Broadly, there are similarities among the models. Each model acknowledges the cognitive and emotional impact of a traumatic event on an individual. OVT and the Functional Descriptive Model state that an event is considered traumatic if it challenges assumptions made by the individual (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). For example, if an individual holds the assumption that "the world is a safe place" and encounters an event that challenges that assumption, they will experience mental and emotional turmoil. Both of these theories, as well as the Affective-Cognitive Processing Model posit that growth occurs through the cognitive and emotional struggle to process the new trauma information, rebuild previously held assumptions, and create a holistic life narrative.

Another aspect of growth inherent in these theories is the role of social support and other environmental factors, as well as personal qualities of the individuals who have experienced trauma. Through their work creating a quantitative measure for posttraumatic groth, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) have conducted studies comparing outcomes of growth to personality characteristics. The researchers reported moderate correlations between their posttraumatic growth inventory and personality traits of openness to experience and extraversion. Furthermore, other studies have found a

moderate correlation between posttraumatic growth and optimism (Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009). One study examining OVT as a framework for explaining stress related growth after sport injury found that competence and relatedness were important for increasing subjective well-being, and thus growth, through the rehabilitation process (Wadey, Podlog, Galli, & Meallalieu, 2016).

Posttraumatic Growth and Sport

Theories of post-traumatic growth have been used in sport settings to explain the relationship between trauma and sport success. However, there have been a range of conclusions reached about the importance of trauma, challenge, and adversity in creating sport success. Sarkar and Fletcher (2017) stated that adversity and trauma are necessary for success and without adversity and trauma an athlete "will not be successful at the highest levels (i.e., winning an Olympic gold medal and, in particular, winning gold medals across Olympic Games)" (p. 162). Additionally, Sarkar and Fletcher posited that "the psychosocial skills that athletes already have or bring to the adversity and trauma will not be enough on their own (even if they are further developed) to achieve at the highest levels" (p. 164). Other researchers have considered the implications of this position and offered debate as to the extent and type of trauma that is necessary to develop elite status. For example, Gucciardi (2017) suggested that it is important to understand the difference between cumulative and single event trauma experiences as well as when they occur in the developmental time period.

Additionally, Collins and MacNamara (2017) offered a scathing review of Hardy et al.'s (2017) study that argued for a causal link between early life negative events and later success in sport, stating that these researchers provided their results uncritically

without considering the impacts on parents, coaches, and athletes who are interested in talent development of athletes. Collins, MacNamara, and McCarthy (2016a) conducted a study similar to that of Hardy et al. in which they examined the difference between (a) successful national level athletes (i.e., playing at the premiership level with at least 50 appearances with their team), (b) national level athletes (i.e., playing at the premiership level with less than five international appearances), and (c) athletes who were successful as youth athletes but were playing at the championship level, one level below the premiership level. Collins et al. found no significant differences between the groups in incidence of traumatic events, but noted that there was a difference in the perceived impact of traumatic events between the athletes. The researchers reported that successful national level athletes were less likely to report significant distress due to the experience of trauma. Collins et al. stated that this finding suggests the ability to proactively cope with challenges and trauma is more important to talent development than just having experienced trauma.

Complications Related to how Trauma and Posttraumatic Growth are Defined in Sport

One issue with determining the impacts of trauma in sport has been how trauma is defined. Researchers define trauma on a wide spectrum, from life events outside of sport that lead to emotional distress to surprise conditioning during a practice. Furthermore, different terms have been used to describe positive changes that result after experiencing trauma, further complicating how these constructs are examined.

The debate about what kind and how much trauma is needed for sporting success is further complicated by the indiscriminate use of the terms adversity, challenge, stressor and trauma by different researchers to describe the type and intensity level of negative

life events. In fact, Howells et al., (2017) conducted a systematic review on research related to adversity-related growth and its impact on performance and found that researchers used the terms “trauma,” “stressor,” and “adversity” to describe a multitude of negative life events. Some of these negative life events are sport injury (Galli & Reel, 2012a; Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullogh, 2013; Wadey, Podlog, Galli, & Mellalieu, 2016), being cut from a team (Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015), experiencing sexual, physical, or emotional abuse by coaches (Stirling & Kerr, 2015; Tamminen et al., 2013), death of a loved one, parental divorce, and political unrest (Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015). Howells et al., (2017) grouped these negative life events into eight higher order categories, specifically (a) injury, (b) physical illness, (c) developmental experiences, (d) mental health, (e) interpersonal experiences, (f) sport-specific experiences, (g) performance lifestyle, and (h) other. Collins and MacNamara have written several articles about the use of trauma in sport to promote increased performance. However, they consider the use of a surprise beep test, a paced running test used cardiovascular fitness, as an intervention that is akin to other traumatic experiences such as emotional abuse. The lack of clarity of what constitutes as a traumatic experience creates challenges for researchers and practitioners when considering the nuances in the relationship between trauma and later sport success.

Complications Related to how Growth is Defined in Sport

Furthermore, the research on positive outcomes after experiencing a negative life event also has been contested with the use of different terms to describe growth such as posttraumatic growth, growth following adversity, adversarial growth, and stress-related growth (Howells et al., 2017). Each of these terms have their origins in different research

epistemologies but have also been used interchangeably. Joseph and Linley (2008), who prefer the term growth following adversity, make the argument that posttraumatic growth has become associated with posttraumatic stress as a diagnostic label, and thus, has become too narrow of a definition because growth can occur in the absence of posttraumatic stress disorder. In addition, Park (2009) makes clear distinctions between stress related growth and posttraumatic growth, indicating that stress related growth is a less radical change that is not permanent and occurs in response to more common life stressors. However, there can be challenges in distinguishing between these terms. For example, Galli and Reel (2012b) noted the differences between stress related growth and posttraumatic growth, identified that they were studying stress related growth, but used a posttraumatic growth inventory as a measure because it is the most used and validated measure of any kind of growth. A lack of clarity and distinction between terms related to trauma and to positive outcomes following trauma makes considering the nuances in the relationship between trauma and sport success unclear.

Conceptual Differences between Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth in Sport

There is a significant amount of research and theory about how individuals make sense of their traumatic experiences that lead to positive changes. The research on how growth occurs is integral to the claim that elite athletic success can be accomplished only with trauma experience. Many of the practical implications offered by researchers who make such claims focus on challenging athletes by introducing them to progressively more difficult stressors within the sport environment that are deliberate and purposeful (Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, & Brown, 2015), which is also

recommended to help athletes build resilience (Kegelaers & Wylleman, 2019; Kegelaers, Wylleman, & Oudejans, 2019).

While there are similarities between resilience and posttraumatic growth and how each aids in dealing with challenging situations, these constructs are qualitatively different. Resilience is considered a cluster of personality traits and skills that help individuals deal with stressors, whereas posttraumatic growth is a process that leads to positive outcomes after experiencing trauma (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). Additionally, to be resilient one does not have had to experience trauma; rather, it is a disposition that helps individuals successfully navigate a wide range of stressors and challenges (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). Collins and MacNamara (2012) state that resilience occurs through skill building and can be done deliberately and purposefully. Moreover, research suggests that those who are more resilient are less likely to experience posttraumatic growth because they are less likely to have their fundamental beliefs shaken, a prerequisite of experiencing posttraumatic growth. For example, one study examining resilience and posttraumatic growth in those who have experienced terrorism and war found an inverse relationship between resilience and posttraumatic growth, implying that those who were more resilient were more able to handle the day-to-day stressors of war (Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, Solomon, 2009).

It also appears that one does not have to experience earth-shattering traumas to experience posttraumatic growth. Galli and Reel (2012b) conducted a study in which they found instances of growth in NCAA Division 1 student-athletes who reported challenges such as mental and physical stress of sport, sport injury, and time demands. This may occur because there is a culture of strength and toughness in sport that may impact

athletes' perceptions of their experiences with trauma, whereby there is an expectation that growth occurs from experiencing challenges, including trauma (Galli & Reel, 2012b; Howells, et al., 2015; Day & Wadey, 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2015). Beliefs such as these may play into cultural scripts, such as that of the triumphant hero who has overcome some adversity, and may lead to people believing they have grown from trauma despite there being no evidence to support it. Some research has suggested that actual growth does not occur and these changes to relationships and life philosophies are actually justifications after the fact to make sense of the negative life events (Ford, Tennen, & Albert, 2008; Howells & Fletcher, 2016; Maercker & Zoellner, 2004;). Furthermore, Ford et al., (2008) make the argument that trauma is a disruption to natural human development and posttraumatic growth is simply the continuation of natural development across the lifespan after a trauma occurs.

It is important to note that the perception of the event by the individual experiencing the trauma is what ultimately determines the intensity of the stressor (Galli & Reel, 2012; Howells et al., 2017; Tamminen et al., 2012). Individuals can experience the same event, and only one may find that it overwhelms them to the point that it may be considered traumatic. This is important for both researchers and practitioners to consider when determining proper terminology as well as interventions for addressing growth. Additionally, it is important to consider coaches' roles in encouraging growth after a negative life event as they are often an influential person in an athletes' life (Collins et al., 2016b; Davis & Jowett, 2010).

Social Support and the Role of Coaches

A central part to many theories of growth is the importance of social support (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), and research cites the importance of social support as a protective factor for experiencing potentially traumatic events (Howard Sharp et al., 2017). Within the sporting world, coaches provide a significant amount of social support to their athletes, and the coach-athlete relationship can serve as a protective factor to the impacts of trauma (Davis & Jowett, 2010). Research has shown the importance of the coach-athlete relationship in fostering performance and well-being as athletes often see their coaches as attachment figures, meaning they look for support from coaches during times of stress (Davis & Jowett, 2010).

According to OVT, it is important for social support to provide the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to help individuals move toward growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005). Mageau and Vallerand (2003) proposed a coaching model that encourages coaches to foster competence, relatedness, and autonomy and termed the model autonomy-supportive coaching. This model was originally used as a motivational model; however, given the overlap of the basic psychological needs, autonomy-supportive coaching also may be an appropriate framework to evaluate how coaches may promote posttraumatic growth.

Adie, Duda, and Ntoumanis (2008) found that when athletes perceived their coaches engaging in autonomy-supportive behaviors their psychological needs were met. Furthermore, fulfilled psychological needs were associated with higher levels of well-being, specifically, the experience of vitality. Vitality is linked to feelings of psychological well-being from the eudamonic tradition, which is in line with how Joseph and Linley (2005) conceptualize well-being needed for growth. The satisfaction of basic

psychological needs has been linked to well-being as well as increased internal motivation and athletic success (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Reynolds & McDonough, 2015). Furthermore, in a youth sample, Reynolds and McDonough (2015) found that athletes who perceived that they had a closer relationship with their coaches were more likely to experience both direct and indirect effects on intrinsic motivation.

In addition to coaches providing support for their athletes, coaches play a role in providing challenge and adversity to increase their athlete's performance and resilience (Kegelaers & Wylleman, 2018). Many coaches believe their main role is to develop athletes' skills and abilities toward reaching their athletic goals (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). It is apparent in sport that athletes will face many challenges while they pursue elite level sport, and researchers note the importance of training athletes to handle these challenges through purposeful strategies (Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Collins et al., 2016b; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2016). Coaches will use a variety of strategies and techniques to push athletes out of their comfort zones. In a study conducted by Kegelaers, Wylleman, and Oudejans (2019) the researchers described "planned disruptions" that coaches use to train athletes to handle less than optimal conditions. Based on interviews with elite level coaches, they categorized nine different ways coaches purposeful introduce stress into the training environment: (a) location (i.e., training in an unpleasant location), (b) competition simulation (i.e., practicing high pressure situations, encouraging competition among players), (c) punishment and rewards (i.e., pushups, cleaning, playing in the next competition), (d) physical strain (i.e, very demanding physical exercises), (e) stronger competition (i.e., seeking out competition

against those who are better than their athletes), (f) distraction (i.e., giving opponent unfair advantage, play crowd noise through speakers), (g) unfairness (i.e., referees make bad calls), (h) restrictions on play (i.e., only can make certain moves), and (i) outside the box (i.e., playing other sports, practicing in cold weather). Furthermore, Kegelaers et al. (2019) examined why coaches use these strategies and found that coaches believed that challenging athletes was important for a variety of reasons, including getting used to be stressed, creating awareness into their behavior, developing mental skills and resilience, and developing as a team.

Coaches, however, also can be a source of trauma by being emotionally (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kavanagh, Brown, & Jones, 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2015), physically (Stafford, Alexander, & Fry, 2013), or sexually (Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussalli, & Tapp, 2008; Hartill, 2013) abusive toward their athletes, The pursuit of athletic excellence can at times leave athletes vulnerable to coaches who push athletes too far while believing they are acting in their athletes' best interest. For the same reasons noted above as to why coaches challenge their athletes, coaches may be unaware of when they cross the line in attempt to improve athletes' skills. For instance, emotional abuse is prevalent and accepted in sport, and coaches may be unaware of the harm they induce (Stirling & Kerr, 2009, 2015). A study examining athletes' perceptions of emotional abuse revealed that athletes responded to emotional abuse with fear and would normalize the behavior due to the power and influence held by coaches (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Furthermore, abuse in sport has been linked to general feelings of unhappiness, depression, eating disorders, low self-efficacy, anxiety, decreased motivation, impaired focus, and impaired performance (Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2013).

Similar to the cultural scripts that may influence individuals' perceptions of posttraumatic growth, cultural scripts in sport that prioritize toughness and the belief that one must endure to become great may influence coaches' use of abusive strategies. In a critique of the mental toughness construct Andersen (2011) stated that "from years of working with athletes, I am convinced that we need to focus more on relationship histories (loving ones, abusive ones) and relationship building than we do any particular interventions (e.g., mental toughness training) if we want to help athletes change for the better and become happier, and maybe more mentally tough." (p. 84). Andersen's position considers the overall well-being of athletes and highlights questions as to whether or not the pursuit of elite level sport is a healthy one. For example, consider that Hardy et al. (2017) found that super-elite athletes were more likely to have characteristics of ruthlessness, selfishness, and perfectionism, leaving others such as Baker (2017) to wonder if these characteristics can be healthy and adaptive outside of sport.

Summary of Literature Review

The relationship between trauma and sport success is an intriguing one. The research generally claims a positive correlation between experiencing early life trauma and becoming a successful athlete. However, the process under which this occurs is still murky. Theories on posttraumatic growth provide a helpful framework to clarify how the process of experiencing trauma to becoming a successful athlete may occur, but there is significant debate as to whether posttraumatic growth is real or even ideal. Also, there is a disconnect among researchers regarding how they define important terms such as trauma, challenge, adversity, and posttraumatic growth that may lead to confusion about the relevance of trauma in sport success. In other words, is it justifiable to state that a

trauma such as losing a parent compares to being cut from a team and that either or both of these types of trauma are necessary for sport success at the highest levels?

The role coaches play in the development of athletes is another consideration when attempting to understand the trauma-sport success relationship. Previous research highlights the various roles coaches may fill that can either protect athletes from negative effects of trauma or induce these negative effects. The culture of mental toughness in sport may reinforce coaches' beliefs about the need for challenge to create successful athletes. Yet, without a critical lens with which to evaluate these beliefs, coaches may find themselves doing more harm than good. Therefore, it is important to determine how much and what kind of trauma may lead to sport success before making claims that it is necessary.

Purpose of the Present Research

The concept of overcoming traumatic experiences is one that many athletes may have encountered experientially, either from their own experiences, from others around them, or cultural scripts that exist in and out of sport. However, understanding the process of overcoming traumatic experiences has still been somewhat elusive. Given the many negative consequences that can occur from experiencing trauma, particularly in childhood, it is important to gain clarity about the relationship between trauma and sport success to better inform sport policies, coaching practices, and sport culture.

It is important to consider coaches' beliefs because it is likely that their coaching behaviors will be influenced by these beliefs (Cassidy et al., 2009; Horn, 2008). In her model of coaching effectiveness, Horn (2008) outlined that coaches' expectancies, values, beliefs, and goals influences their behavior, which ultimately impacts athlete

outcomes such as performance, behavior, and motivation. Furthermore, Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac (2009) acknowledge the importance of coaches using a reflexive practice to understand their own values and beliefs in a way that can help them craft a coaching philosophy, or a set of guiding principles that informs how they behave and make decision in the coaching context.

Thus, the present study will explore coaches' perceptions and beliefs related to how trauma experienced by athletes impacts their sport development and as well as their perceived role in trauma-sport success relationship. Using interviews, a qualitative approach will be adopted. Organismic valuing theory will guide the interview questions and the analysis of the data by providing a framework in which to couch coaching behaviors within the posttraumatic growth literature.

Chapter 3

Method

The purpose of the present study was to explore coaches' perceptions and beliefs related to how trauma experienced by athletes impacts their sport development as well as their perceived role in the trauma-sport success relationship. Previous research has examined how success in sport may be impacted by the experience of trauma but has not investigated how coaches view this relationship or how they perceive themselves influencing or mediating this relationship. This study attempted to answer two questions: (a) What are coaches' perceptions about the role of trauma, challenges, and adversity in creating athletic success? and (b) How do coaches' perceptions of the role of trauma in creating athletic success inform their coaching behaviors?

Research Design

This qualitative study utilized an interpretivist phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework to guide the collection and interpretation of data. IPA focuses on the description of a particular phenomenon to understand participants' experiences of that phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This framework has theoretical underpinnings based in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Broadly speaking, phenomenology is a philosophical approach that concerns itself with the experience of living (Smith et al., 2009). Researchers utilizing this philosophy are interested in understanding what phenomena are important to individuals and how these phenomena are experienced. Hermeneutics is concerned with interpreting, meaning making, and understanding (Smith et al., 2009). This occurs on the part of the participants as they are thinking through and discussing their experiences with the phenomenon of

interest, and also on the part of the researcher who attempts to interpret and make meaning out of the participants experience. Paying attention to intent and language, such as examples, stories, and metaphors, aids the process of meaning making on part of the researcher. Finally, idiography is concerned with the experience of the single or the few (Smith et al., 2009). Rather than focusing on generalizability, IPA attempts to understand a specific phenomenon in a specific context with specific people. This philosophical underpinning informs participant recruitment (i.e., small purposive sampling) and data analysis.

Since there is limited research exploring coaches' understanding of the relationship between trauma and success in sport, it is appropriate to use an exploratory approach that seeks description and understanding. Furthermore, the aim of this study was to illuminate the nuance in the relationship between trauma and sport success and how coaches may play a role in this relationship. As such, this study was interested in how college coaches at a NCAA Division I member institution understand the relationship between trauma and later sport success and how their roles may influence this relationship.

Participants

A total of 10 coaches were interviewed. Each coach was coaching at a NCAA Division I university in the Mid-Atlantic, at the time of the interview. The participants consisted of eight men and two women, including six head coaches and four assistant coaches across half of the 18 sport programs. Most coaches identified as Caucasian (n = 8), and two coaches identified as Black. The median age was 39 years-old (ranging from 31 to 63 years), and the average years of coaching experience was 18 years. Six coaches

had obtained a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education, and four had obtained master's degrees.

Procedure

Upon IRB approval, participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Each coach was contacted via email by the current sport psychologist in the athletic department who assisted in the recruitment of participants. Coaches were emailed information about the study to gauge their interest in participating, and coaches who agreed to participate were contacted by the author to set up a time for the interview. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via telephone and were recorded utilizing built-in software on an Acer laptop and saved in secure files. At the beginning of the interview, participants were read a consent agreement (See Appendix B) and asked if they had any questions or concerns about their participation. Each coach verbally consented to complete the interview, and record of the verbal consent was noted on individual consent forms. Each recorded interview was transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Interviews ranged in time from 45 to 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview guide that separated questions into two main themes: (a) beliefs about trauma and sport success and (b) coaching behaviors impacted by these beliefs (see Appendix A for interview guide). According to the guidelines offered by Smith and Osborn (2008), open-ended questions were used to allow participants to lead the conversation so that the researcher can explore the worldview of the participant. A technique called funneling was used to guide the order of questions, which calls for broad questions to be at the beginning of the interview with more specific questions falling in the middle of the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2008). To establish rapport, participants were first asked

demographic information, how many years they have coached, whether they are a head or assistant coach, and their coaching philosophy. The coaching philosophy question provided context for coaching beliefs and behavior as they relate to trauma and sport success (Cassidy, Jones, Potrac, 2009). Then, participants were asked what they know and/or think about trauma and were provided information about what current research suggests about the relationship between trauma and sport success. After coaches were given this information, the questions that followed prompted them to give their thoughts about the link between trauma and sport success. Then, a series of questions were asked to gain understanding about how coaches understand their role in working with athletes and how trauma may be a factor in their approach. Questions related to post traumatic growth were informed by Organismic Valuing Theory (Joseph & Linley, 2005).

The interview guide was created and approved by the JMU IRB just prior to academic and athletic activities being shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because this event had potential for being perceived as traumatic and/or challenging as a natural or global disaster, the author determined that asking coaches questions about how their athletes and teams were adapting to these new and uncertain circumstances could be valuable as a real-time evaluation of how coaches may relate to athletes who are experiencing trauma and/or adversity. Thus, a final question was added and received IRB approval through an addendum that addressed how coaches perceived the pandemic as affecting their athletes now and in the future.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was guided by recommendations by Smith and Osborn (2008) and completed by a research team consisting of a lead investigator and two

research assistants. First, as the lead investigator the author read each transcript, one at a time, to increase familiarity while making notes about content, language use, and initial interpretations, as well as highlighting significant statements. Then, the author reread the transcript and engaged in an iterative coding process to identify emergent themes that captured the essence of the participant's experience that also was generalizable to the other participants' experiences of the same phenomena. These emergent themes then were compiled into an initial list. This process occurred for each transcript, one at a time, with the emergent themes from subsequent transcripts being compared to previously read transcripts to ensure that relevant statements from the participants were included. Finally, the author identified convergence and divergence in emergent themes across transcripts and created a list of broad themes and subthemes. (Cresswell, 2007). Organismic Valuing Theory was used to guide the process of categorizing themes while maintaining the language used by participants.

The two research assistants, a psychology professor and a doctoral student knowledgeable about and trained in the IPA framework, followed the same process the author carried out as described above for the first two transcripts. That is, the research assistants read through the transcript, made initial notes, reread the transcript to engage in an iterative coding process, and created themes and subthemes. For the remainder of the transcripts, the research assistants evaluated the audit trail (discussed below) created by the author.

The research team met approximately every two weeks to discuss each transcript one at a time and review initial thoughts and impressions. Then they discussed interpretations of the data and themes and subthemes. Disagreements regarding themes

and interpretations were discussed until a consensus was reached. Of note, the psychology professor also has a professional relationship with many of the coaches in the sample in his role as a sport psychologist and offered his interpretations through the lens of having worked with coaches in that context. Finally, the research team discussed the compilation of the themes and subthemes generated across the entirety of transcripts, following the same process as outlined above, until agreement was reached on the final themes and subthemes.

Trustworthiness

As the primary investigator, the author took field notes during each interview that captured nonverbal information and the author's initial reactions to the response of the participants. The use of field notes can provide richer context for the analysis of the verbal data collected, and thus help interpretations stay grounded in participant experience (Phillipi & Lauderdale, 2018). Throughout the data analyses process, the author kept a reflexive journal to help her make sense of her perceptions and beliefs and continue bracketing her own experiences. The author journaled after several transcripts at a time to organize her thoughts and experiences related to analyzing each transcript. The author also journaled through the process of creating themes and subthemes across transcripts to bracket her experiences and knowledge with individual transcripts.

Furthermore, the author utilized an audit trail to create a complete record of the data analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail consisted of the author taking notes on the transcripts of initial reactions to the interview, emerging themes, and the broad themes created for each transcript. This was done in a such a way that one could follow the logic of how final themes and interpretations were created (Smith et al.,

2009). This procedure allows for an independent person to evaluate and make sense of how the author reached her conclusions. Finally, the two research assistants evaluated the audit trail and played the role of "critical friend" to ensure that the author's notes and themes were being generated from participants' experiences as closely as possible (Smith et al., 2009).

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

Using IPA involves engaging in a "double hermeneutic" whereby the researcher is interpreting the interpretations of the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008). To make sure the participants' worldview remains at the center of the analysis, researchers must suspend or bracket their own experiences. This is a process of setting aside previously held beliefs and experiences to come from a place of curiosity when exploring a particular phenomenon, and it is common practice for researchers to disclose their beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews relevant to the research question (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Thus, it is important for the author to share her beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews to provide context for the interpretation of the participants' experiences.

As a doctoral student in clinical psychology, the author has a general understanding of trauma and the impacts of trauma on well-being. Additionally, her background in sport psychology and resilience has shaped the way she views talent development as a process of learning physical skills (i.e., the technical aspect of sport) as well as learning strategy (i.e., the tactical aspect of sport). There also is a process of developing the ability to become mentally prepared by learning and practicing mental skills, such as self-talk, mental imagery, and goal setting, and adopting attitudes that facilitate performance. The author believes coaches impact talent development by a

combination of teaching and providing feedback, appropriately challenging athletes, and creating a supportive environment for athletes to learn.

The author believes that sport is a place where individuals can learn to become more resilient and have high well-being depending on the sport environment. When coaches come from a place of understanding and empathy, they have the capacity to provide a healing environment for those who have experienced trauma. However, the author does not believe that experiencing trauma alone, is necessary to achieve athletic success because there are a variety of personal, physical, cognitive, and emotional characteristics that are required as well.

Chapter 4

Results

The data analysis process outlined above resulted in six themes and several subthemes. While there was variation in responses across coaches, there were also similarities regarding beliefs about trauma and sport success as well as how coaching behaviors are influenced by these beliefs. The six themes and their subthemes are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes that Describe the Relationship Between Trauma and Sport Success with a Sample of NCAA Division I Coaches.

#	Theme	Subtheme
1	The relationship between trauma and sport success is nuanced	The necessity of trauma
2	Coaching philosophy influences how coaches view the relationship between trauma and sport success	a. Coach-athlete relationship b. Individual needs in coach-athlete relationship c. Challenges relating to athletes
3	Hard things, including trauma, adversity, & challenge, are inevitable	
4	Trauma is intense, more so than obstacles/challenges/adversity	
5	Hard things lead to growth and development	a. Trauma transforms athletes' beliefs/ values, motivation, and relationships b. Coaches intentionally challenge athletes
6	Hard things are not sufficient for growth; other pieces to the puzzle are needed	a. Social support b. Coping c. Environmental factors d. Individual athlete traits

Theme #1 – The Relationship between Trauma and Sport Success is Nuanced

Throughout the interviews it was common for the coaches to pause, deliberate, consider different viewpoints, and state how they were unsure, hesitant, and/or reluctant to make claims about the relationship between trauma and sport success. Several coaches even caught themselves being at odds, as illustrated by Participant 8 who commented, "I guess that's where I'm just confused about adversity versus trauma. I feel like I'm constantly contradicting myself." The coaches appeared to be "thinking out loud" and processing their understanding of this relationship in real time. This theme highlights the process of how the coaches attempted to communicate their understanding of the nuanced relationship between trauma and sport success, and this thinking out loud and processing in real time was present throughout the interviews as well.

A few coaches noted how their views regarding the impact of trauma on sport success changed over time, citing different experiences they have had coaching athletes over the years. Perhaps coaches can see the nuance in the relationship due to their own experiences across time, which may illuminate when trauma leads to sport success and when it does not. For example, Participant 3 acknowledged that her view of trauma has changed across time, due to her coaching experiences:

> It's changed over my coaching career. In the very beginning I would say trauma was associated with an accident, or a death. I assumed trauma was this person had a near death experience. It didn't have to be, not over the top bad, but really, really bad. Now, it's funny within the last seven years I associate trauma to be more with how someone is handling something that is very hard for them to deal with. Whether it's a relationship, whether it's a single event, whether it's multiple

> events. Whether it's something they're going through something right now. I learned that trauma is not necessarily that single car crash, but it could be something that's not such a physical event but an emotional one.

Subtheme #1 – The Necessity of Trauma

One subtheme emerged within theme one, which addresses coaches' beliefs regarding the necessity of trauma. Nine out of the 10 coaches responded that they did not believe that trauma, as they defined it, was necessary for later sport success. Participant 10 noted her reaction to hearing that some researchers believe trauma is necessary:

> Well, that's like a really powerful statement. I didn't receive that well at first. From a philosophy what came to my mind is what I would consider negative coaching, like someone intentionally crossing boundaries, creating stress. Like, (pause, sigh), discomfort in order to have somebody achieve athletically.

Some coaches seemed to be trying to work out how trauma might lead to success and noted that they felt unsure or hesitant to say that trauma was necessary. Participant 4 described instances where something must occur to increase skill level to the elite level, but was uncertain if trauma is part of the process:

> So, I've always thought that to get to that elite level something either clicked or something has happened that made them you kind of go up to that next level. But I don't think I would 100% say that it was trauma that did that.

Additionally, Participant 6 expressed caution about assuming that trauma is necessary for sport success:

> I don't think it's necessary (pause) to have a trauma in your life, whether that's with a family member or yourself in order to be successful. No, I wouldn't say so.

> I think it never fails that some of the biggest athletes in the world when their stories come out, they have experienced some sort of trauma. But I'd be reluctant to say that every single person playing at the highest level at their sport has experienced trauma. Now, I guess maybe they've experienced something small, but, I don't know if I would say, all of them. I don't know, to me it would just be hard to tell.

A number of coaches recognized that there were many factors that could contribute to whether or not someone was successful in sport. When it came to trauma, the majority of coaches did not believe that trauma was necessary, but often noted that athletes need to experience and overcome hard things, often described as challenges, adversities, and obstacles. Participant 9 described his views on whether or not trauma leads to later sport success, acknowledging that athletes must experience "obstacles" but hesitating to state that trauma is necessary:

> I actually disagree with that, but I think you can still be a successful athlete and not go through trauma. I think you have to go through some obstacles, but I wouldn't necessarily say trauma from the definition of being in danger and things of that nature. I think that there are still some great life lessons to be learned from having trauma in your life as well. I would just disagree with that.

Participant 1 utilized his personal experience to inform his view, citing athletes he has coached that have been successful without experiencing trauma to his knowledge:

> I've seen kind of all of it and, I don't know what to say about it, but I don't think it's necessary. I've also had athletes that were top four in the Olympic trials, I've had athletes that were runner up in the Olympic trials, and as far as I know, they

had no trauma in their lives, Being a finalist in the Junior World championship and being top four in the Olympic trials, that's pretty successful.

Participant 7 indicated that athletes must experience adversity and also seemed hesitant to endorse trauma as necessary. He clarified that trauma is something more intense than challenges and therefore, not needed:

> That's an interesting thing. I don't agree that you have to go through trauma, and I think it's really more so about how you define the word and how much emphasis you put on what exactly occurred. I think every top athlete has to go through challenges, they have to learn, to perform through adversity. I think they have to be put in uncomfortable situations to know how to respond to uncomfortable situations both in sport and in life. But I don't necessarily think that achieving success in sports is unattainable if you haven't experienced trauma. I just think it's more the degree, and if you rephrase it to challenges and adversity, then yes, I think it's very hard to attain a top level of success without those elements. But to say somebody needs to lose a family friend at an early age to learn and grow into a professional athlete, I don't believe that.

Interestingly, Participant 2 observed how the definition of trauma may impact whether or not he views it as necessary for sport success:

> But if trauma was just this umbrella, and it included all of those things, then in that way, I guess I would agree with that comment. But I guess I don't think that you have to have some of that severity, I guess is the perfect word, in order to be successful. But I do think you need some kind of adversity.

Finally, Participant 3 recognized that there may be a reciprocal relationship between trauma and sport success and expressed feeling uncertain about how the reciprocal relationship might work:

> I guess I think that there's definitely levels and certain levels and certain athletes handle that, but the question is has the trauma prevented them from being even better? Or did that trauma cause them to be the best that they were, and therefore move up a level in terms of performance? I don't know.

Only one participant, Participant 5, agreed that trauma is necessary for sport success. He appeared to make a connection between the need to learn to overcome hard things and not distinguish between trauma, challenge, adversity, or obstacles:

> Oh, I would agree with that then, to be honest (pause). There is no easy path to excellence, whether it's individual or a team and usually there are a series of defining moments that can happen on your journey. I find kids that can overcome difficult things like trauma, or a traumatic experience, find a way to get over the hump. The lesson that they learn was how to overcome this very difficult event. And that lesson is going to find that person to have a higher level of success over time.

Theme #2 – Coaching Philosophy Influences how Coaches View the Relationship between Trauma and Sport Success

When asked to describe their coaching philosophy and the role that they play in their athletes' lives, the coaches' broad views on sport, coaching, and working with athletes revealed a clear link between their philosophy and their view of the relationship between trauma and sport success. This theme summarizes the underlying beliefs that

impact how coaches view the relationship between trauma and support success as well as how they relate with athletes who have experienced trauma. Subthemes that emerged under this theme include the coach-athlete relationship, individual needs in the coach-athlete relationship, and challenges relating to athletes.

A few coaches talked about how values are the foundation of their philosophy. For example, Participant 10 described her philosophy as such:

> I guess in the simplest forms, the thing that I would start with is just core values. So, I think as the years have kind of evolved, I would say it is simply to be positive, be your best, give your best, and play inspired. Those are kind of like four values that I always try to bring to all I do when it comes to coaching. I think values are a really important place to start when it comes to philosophy.

She further described how coaches help guide athletes to success and noted that being adaptable is the most important thing:

> I think to be super successful, when I say successful, I mean to bring out the best in a coordinated way at a group level, (pause) that you really need to be able to adapt and adjust your leadership so that the style's appropriate for the situation.

Participant 5 discussed his values as part of how he builds a culture for his team that helps his athletes become successful in athletics as well as other domains in life. He described his values as "pillars," suggesting that these are the foundations for which he and his athletes rely on. He stated, "And it doesn't matter whether it's [sport], whether it's school, but I think those are the things that we try to live on, that's why we call it the pillars. They are what's holding the building up." He went on to describe how sport can also help athletes define their own values:

> At the end of the day when you're dealing with this age group, the end all be all of this thing, these people leave the leagues, [university], to be positive members of society. (pause). And [sport] is a vehicle for these young men to find out what they really believe in, what's really important to them.

Several coaches shared similar sentiments as Participant 5, noting that their hope for their athletes is not only to develop skill in sport, but in other domains of life. Participant 2 observed the importance of focusing on the development of the person rather than just the athlete. He commented, "Yes, definitely. I think if you just coach the [sport], I don't think you are maximizing their potential. Because they are dynamic and so am I and so I think you have to acknowledge all that."

Participant 3 stated as part of her philosophy that she wants to prepare her athletes for life beyond sport. She described her philosophy with the following:

> So, I do have a holistic approach. I think that it's very important that they develop themselves, not only from an athletic standpoint, but also just the maturity, to learn how to handle difficult situations, how to handle adversity, how to talk with other people, work with other people, and ultimately figure out what they need to do to, to win in whatever environment they're in.

Participant 7 described his holistic approach in similar manner:

> I think in terms of maybe broader than just winning and losing, depending on your setting, I think that my philosophy is to educate my players on both [sport] and on life, through my experiences, through my staff's experiences to better prepare them and to develop relationships with them, that will allow us to do

such. So, certainly, a broad response, but coaching is all about relationships and then end product is about winning.

Subtheme #2a – Coach-Athlete Relationship

Within this theme, a subtheme emerged that illustrates the critical role of the coach-athlete relationship. It appears that the importance that these coaches placed on using values to guide the complete development of an athlete affects how they enter into relationships with their athletes. Coaches varied in their responses to the role they play in their athletes' lives, describing different boundaries they held with their athletes that ranged from limiting involvement in athletes' personal lives to really getting to know their athletes personally.

Overall, the majority of coaches acknowledged that they value their athletes beyond what they contribute to the playing field and do want to get to know them personally. Participant 7 highlighted this sentiment when he said, "So, I think yes, sitting down and approaching the players as human beings as opposed to, X's or O's or pawns is certainly what our staff tries to do." Participant 10 described this notion in response to a reflective statement by the interviewer that highlighted the personal relationships she cultivates with her players:

> I think in a healthy way, in that they know that we care genuinely for them as people. And that they're not machines showing up and just (laughs) executing between the lines for us, and, and winning games.

Participant 1 explained that his position tends to focus more on the athletic and academic pursuits of his athletes, rather than on their personal lives:

> I’m strictly just their coach, but I’m a fan and a supporter of their lives. I don’t know who they date when they date, I don't know when they go out on weekends and they drink, unless they choose to share that with me of course. Of course, they won't share (laugh). I really just support them in moving in the direction of job, career, grad school. We sit down and talk about their future whatever they want to do. And so, I’m really just a support person in their professional life as well as their athletic life, but I’m not involved in their personal lives at all unless they choose to share.

Participant 3 also made a distinction between her role as a coach and the role of a mother, indicating that the role of mother requires involvement in areas of athletes’ lives beyond athletics:

> My goal is not to be their mother, mainly because I feel like a maternal role is one that, I do protect them in a sense, meaning that when we go places, I make sure that they aren’t being harassed, making sure they’re not being treated badly. But, in terms of when I think of a mother or a maternal role, they take care of their kids. They try to take care of every facet of their child’s lives, and I don’t do that with my athletes. I definitely keep within the realm of athletics and how it affects their life, like with their performance, but I don’t delve into their lives like their interpersonal relationships with others. I don’t care about their finances, that kind of a thing.

Participant 2 made a distinction between what is means to be a coach and what it means to be a friend, adding that there is a line between what it means to work with an athlete in a professional manner versus a personal manner:

> I'm not their peer. I am friendly to them, it's a different relationship than that. While a lot of things are very similar to being friendly, and when we think of friends we think of kind or nice and all those things. I am that, but I'm not their friend.

However, Participant 2 clarified the role he does play as a coach and how being friendly is important to getting to know his athletes:

> …and the better I get to know them the better coach I'm going to be. So, my philosophy is really centered around getting to know them in and out of the athletic realm, forming a line of communication, how do they communicate best, things of that nature.

Subtheme #2b – Individual Needs in Coach-Athlete Relationship

Another subtheme that emerged under Theme #2 is the recognition that each athlete will have individual needs in the relationship with their coaches and that this is discovered through prioritizing communication. Participant 9 discussed his desire to get to know his athletes on a personal level, the importance of understanding individual differences, and how he can meet the needs of his players by getting to know them:

> It's depending on who it is, it's different with everyone. Some guys, it was more of a father figure type where you're literally teaching them things as far as how to shave, how to open up a bank account. Some people have gotten some of that good guidance from home, and you're more of a big brother type and you're just encouraging them and pushing them to do better, academically, to do better athletically….It really just depends, person to person, each individual, there's a different relationship with each person. There isn't just one blanket relationship,

> and there's no way you can just say, 'Hey, I'm going to be this way with every person on the team.'

Participant 3 noted that athletes will need different types of roles fulfilled by coaches as well. She commented, "I think it's individual for each athlete. For some I am a mentor, but others I'm strictly a coach that gives them their work outs and tells them what to do." Furthermore, Participant 2 described how athletes may have different comfort levels for how they communicate with coaches.

> Some of them it takes until junior or senior year. Some of them, day one, they'll walk right in and plop down on my couch and be like, 'This is what's going on with me, I thought you just needed to know.' So, I think it kind of depends on the person.

Subtheme #2c – Challenges to Relating to Athletes

Several coaches also acknowledged challenges to being in relationship with athletes, mainly in communicating with them, that may result in difficulty with building relationships. Participant 7 acknowledged the challenges with communication when he described what type of relationship he has with his athletes:

> I think most coaches would say good, and that they can reach the players, and they have good relationships. But that's easily one sided from time to time because you spend a lot of time with these players and maybe somebody doesn't seek the benefits on the field, and that can be a challenge from time to time.

Participant 6 also noted challenges with communication when recounting an instance in which he could tell something was bothering one of his players, but was having difficulty getting the athlete to discuss it:

> But, sometimes they don't want to open up and say certain things because they don't want it to be 'well, he's using an excuse.' Like, 'I don't want to be the guy who's making up excuses why I can't perform.' Almost like trying to be tough when you don't need to be. I think that's probably our hardest thing as a coach is explaining to these guys, 'No, that's not you being tough, that's you being closed off and it's going to affect you in more ways than it is right now than if you don't talk about it.

Participant 1 expressed a desire to be able to help his athletes, but recognized they have the choice to decide when and if they are going to disclose anything to him. He described a situation where he knew an athlete sought counseling, but due to various reasons, was unsure of why she did so:

> One of them [athlete] is dealing with that system now. and I don't know why. Because of the HIPPA laws and she doesn't have to share with me, I have no idea…So, something at home triggered whatever is going on with her, and I wish I could know, but that's her choice, She's an adult, and I'm not allowed to know until she tells me. And it eats me up on the inside, I wish I could help.

Participant 6 also discussed the challenges of having athletes disclose personal information, connecting the importance of having a strong relationship with his athletes to how comfortable they may be sharing things with him:

> And to be honest, the toughest thing for me has always been there's always somebody on the team that something has happened in the past and you just still didn't know about it. The player never filled you in. None of his coaches, maybe they knew about it maybe not, never filled you in. You find it out later, while

> you're coaching them, that something major happened when they were younger. Which I think is always a cool part of coaching because then, if they do end up telling you something along those lines that you had no idea about, you sort of have validation of knowing, okay, this guy really does trust me.

A few coaches described how challenging it can be to work with athletes when they are experiencing trauma, and at times, have to deliver traumatic news to them. Participant 3 described a situation where she had to tell an athlete at a competition that a relative of the athlete had passed away. She stated, "That in itself is very traumatic for the athlete, that was very traumatic for me to have this information, to have to give the athlete this information, and we're in this athletic environment." Additionally, Participant 10 described a coach's role as a "first responder" and noted the challenges that can come with being in that role:

> And I think in extreme trauma situations, (pause), god, it can get really overwhelming for coaches and it's super important to have healthy boundaries too. But a lot of times, you end up being a first responder. And (pause), it is so important to understand what resources are available for that individual whose dealing with the trauma. But also I think as coaches for us to understand that those resources are also available for us, too. I'm calling the counselor saying, 'I'm working with a kid whose an addict. I am scared for her life because she posted something that says she's going to take her life. What do I do?'

Theme #3 – Hard Things, including Trauma, Challenge, and Adversity, are Inevitable

The third theme that emerged from the data encompasses the idea that all people, including athletes, will face hard things in their life. The term "hard things" was chosen intentionally to capture all definitions that the coaches used to describe trauma, adversity, challenges, and obstacles. The coaches collectively appeared unsure with the minutiae of defining trauma and how it is different from other life difficulties. While most coaches made a distinction between trauma and adversity/challenges/obstacles, they often used these terms interchangeably. Thus, "hard things" represents the meanings and similarities between all of these terms, and highlights the inevitable role of trauma, adversity, challenge, and obstacles in achieving sport success. For example, Participant 3 indicated, "To say that it's unavoidable, yes, I mean, everybody's experienced some type of trauma based on your definition." Participant 8 also noted the pervasiveness of hard things when he stated, "I think every single player, I think everybody in life period, but I think every player in their career is going to face an obstacle, an adversity."

Some coaches also discussed how it seems that accounts of trauma were often part of an athlete's story, perhaps suggesting that the most successful athletes who are well-known beyond the collegiate level tend to have a trauma history. Participant 6 captured this notion in the following quote:

> I guess I should more so say, probably the vast majority have experienced some sort of trauma. There's countless stories that they play on those [ESPN's] 30 for 30 or documentaries, men and women have gone through something traumatic at a young age or, in college, or something like that.

Each coach was asked directly if they had ever coached an athlete who had experienced trauma, and each coach was able to share an example of one or more

athletes. Most coaches were able to recall an example without hesitation and indicated that it was quite a common experience for them. Participant 9 noted:

> Oh, absolutely. A number of players throughout my[many] years. And some players have experienced trauma during different times. Some players have experienced trauma before they came to campus. Some have experienced some while they are a college student.

Participant 5 also shared numerous examples of the types of hard things his athletes have experienced:

> I've had kids that have had injuries, I've been around kids that have had deaths in their families, like in their immediate family, like lose a parent, lose a brother. Parents lose a job. I was part of a team where one of the players committed suicide.

Additionally, Participant 7 reflected that every coach will experience coaching an athlete that has experienced trauma, whether or not the coach knows about an athletes' previous trauma history:

> Oh, 100%. And I think that most coaches that say that they've never had any players go through any traumatic event probably are turning a little bit of a blind eye. Maybe, just maybe, there are some coaches out there that, just for whatever reason, it just hasn't worked out that way. But for the most part, in every given year, there's somebody that is going through something. Whether or not it's your role to kind of step in and facilitate next steps, that's kind of case by case. But, ultimately, yes there are multitudes of time players have been experiencing traumatic things in their life.

Finally, Participant 6 recalled an experience that demonstrated to him that it is likely his athletes have already experienced hard things in their life, perhaps even before he has coached them. He recalled an instance where one athlete made a joke, and another player did not find it funny because the topic at hand reminded him of his mother's death:

> And it was like, holy shit, and it hit me like a ton of bricks in the sense of these are just guys sitting around, stretching on the field. They're all busting on each other and joking with each other, and he just happened to take something in a different way than what it was meant. And (pause), well you know, it should have never been said in the first place. And you start thinking about it as a coach, and I'm like, man, this is just another reason why you got to be careful joking around about stuff, because we weren't joking around about death or anything. But you need to know the players' background the best you can. And it never fails, we always find out something later than what we would have hoped.

Theme #4 – Trauma is Intense, more so than Obstacles/Challenges/Adversity

Prior to being provided with an accepted definition of trauma, the coaches were asked how they would define trauma. Many coaches made a distinction between trauma, which was often described as significant or intense, and less hard things, such as obstacles, challenges, or adversity. The coaches appeared to have a sense that trauma is life-threatening and severe, but that individual differences in perception of traumatic events may influence the impact of trauma. Although the coaches drew a distinction between trauma and other challenging circumstances, they were less clear about how specific situations that occur in sport, such as being cut from a team or getting injured, may be defined as trauma.

When coaches were asked to think of examples of what they may consider trauma, many cited death, being abused or neglected, or witnessing interpersonal violence. Coaches identified that trauma is often negative and there are long term consequences, as recognized by Participant 8:

> When you say traumatic event, like, boom, automatically, like I told you, I start thinking like something so bad. Like (pause), somebody getting shot, (pause) something that they can't overcome. When I think of traumatic, it just something's that going to affect them forever, and a lot of times not in a positive way. And, (pause), I think sometimes people overcome that, but a lot of times (pause). I haven't been around enough to see a kid go overcome a traumatic, traumatic, thing.

Additionally, Participant 4 described a range of events as trauma that are fatal or cause suffering:

> I would say it was, maybe an accident, or somebody close to you either died or had some major catastrophe, whether, maybe like, cancer, or something that was life-threatening. Or there was some event where a person was traumatized by sexually or mentally by a parent or something like that that caused you emotional distress, I'd say.

Some coaches included a broader range of life altering events, such as experiencing parents' divorce, injury, or loss of identity. Participant 1 expanded on this definition to include the loss of identity as a traumatic event:

> For a high school kid to not make the squad, JV or varsity, that could be brutal because they could have just spent six or eight years of their lives doing nothing

> but playing basketball, and nothing but playing soccer, and they've done almost nothing else in their lives that they enjoy and suddenly the rug's pulled out. Now what do I do, who am I? I'm not a basketball player anymore, I'm not a soccer player anymore.

Participant 10 offered a comprehensive definition of what trauma is to her and noted that there is a broad range of things that could be considered traumatic.

> I think the simplest form, when you're talking athletics, is like a physical trauma. Something, you lose a limb. That would be super traumatic, especially to an athlete who values their body. I think that you could experience trauma being verbally abused of some sort. How somebody speaks to you, how someone crosses boundaries, maybe violates you, (pause) could definitely be traumatic. I think that (pause) something that could kind of crush your spirit, your values and beliefs and something that makes you feel despair or hopeless about your future or something changing. Something feeling very permanent that's not changeable, I think, could crush your spirit. That could be somebody else's behaviors or patterns or addictions that impact you. I think that could be super traumatic depending on what the behaviors were around you. So, I think trauma can be really broad. It could be one short event where you like you saw something that was just uncomfortable or was life threatening or evoked fear or could be something that happened to somebody else, not necessarily you, but you bore witness to that.

Regardless of how they defined trauma, the majority of coaches distinguished between trauma and less severe hard things. Participant 2 illustrated this distinction:

> There's this pyramid of severity, and trauma is at the top. Well, I guess death would be at the ultimate top, and trauma would be right underneath it. I guess in my mind, if I'm looking at this kind of visual model, I see adversity and challenges underneath trauma.

He further described how there can be similar outcomes of trauma and less intense situations such as challenges, but that there is still a distinction between trauma and other hard things:

> I would say that an adversity or a challenge is difficult. And it doesn't mean it's easy. And it doesn't mean that it doesn't shape who you are, or it doesn't alter your life in a behavior or characteristic or in some nature in that way. But I do place a severity on the word trauma.

Participant 7 also distinguished between trauma and other hard things based on the severity of the outcomes of the event. Interestingly, he noted that some outcomes of trauma may be positive or negative, but it is the intensity of these outcomes that are more associated with trauma rather than adversity:

> You could define a challenge and adversity as breaking your finger. Is that so traumatic that you might give up on the sport, and think that there's never going to be a silver lining, you can never achieve your goals? Usually with something kind of insignificant or maybe minor, that's not the thought process. So, I would look at those types of things as challenges and adverse moments that are actually just as important as some of the larger scale. I think the larger scale traumatic events usually have more drastic consequences. A lot of times if there's something significant, maybe it's an injury or a death, you either come out and

> you really, really learn from them and it does help you and it betters you as a student-athlete or maybe it drives you away from the sport. Whereas, maybe some of those less significant challenges and adversity usually don't have those extremes.

The coaches were asked to distinguish between events that could be defined as traumatic (i.e., being cut from a team at age 16 compared to losing a parent at age 10). A few coaches determined that these were very different situations. For example, Participant 5 stated, "Dramatically different levels what you're talking about. A whole different set of deals that you got to overcome and deal with. I think that's going to matter, yeah. The severity." Furthermore, Participant 9 also stated his belief that these two events are different in intensity:

> I think they're absolutely different. I think one is a life altering thing, and obviously not making a team is an obstacle and, in someone else's eyes, they could be looking at it like traumatic. Maybe they think, 'Hey, I've spent a lot of time working on my game and my skills. I wasn't able to achieve a goal."' But, to me, I think they're totally different. I think not making a team is an obstacle. Losing a parent or losing a family member, I think that's very traumatic.

Participant 8 expressed some disbelief that getting cut from a high school team is a traumatic event and described how he views this type of event as adverse:

> Do you think a 16-year-old getting cut from a team in high school is such a traumatic event that it's going to affect that person for the rest of their life? (pause) Or (pause), is it adversity that's kind of like a bump in the road that is either going to motivate them to do better. Or they just going to tell them like,

> '"Hey you didn't make the conference team. You know what? I'm just not good enough to play. I really think my time is up. I don't love it as much. I'm not going to work as much. I'm going to do something else.' Or is a kid that's going to get cut from a team is so bad that you're going to go down the deep end? I look at those things as just adverse.

A few coaches also acknowledged that defining trauma may be personal and rely on an individual's previous experiences. Participant 2 expressed how trauma may be individualized:

> What might be traumatic to another may not be traumatic to someone else, and that doesn't make it right or wrong. I think we can all agree on what something might be traumatic or not, but I also think it's highly individual, based on a person, based on so many different things. A person's previous experience, their raising, all those things.

Participant 3 admitted that it can be difficult trying to define what is traumatic for someone else, noting that her personal experiences have evolved the way she perceives trauma:

> Man, I think that trauma, is difficult. You say something like you lost a parent at 10 or you didn't make the team. It just seems like one is more frivolous than the other. So, and that's tough to say what is more traumatic for somebody over somebody else. As a coach I've seen all of that. But as an athlete or as someone on the outside looking in, like 'Yeah, you didn't make your team your freshman year. Is that really traumatic? I have an athlete whose father died when she was in middle school. So is that traumatic to you?' I've learned, because I don't think

> that it's that huge traumatic event, but it's not affecting the athlete. And when I meant, my ideas of trauma and how they've evolved.

Finally, Participant 2 provided his own example of comparing challenges faced by an Olympic level athlete and a youth athlete and how these challenges may be perceived by the individual athletes, implying that the individual perspective is important:

> To say because you're on the Olympic stage that matters more to that person than the 6th grader who's playing soccer with his friends who really wants to do well. I don't think it's accurate. So, the challenges or trauma that they may potentially face that impedes their progress though the success or the goal that they're striving to do, I don't think is any greater for the Olympian than necessarily the sixth grader.

Theme #5 – Hard Things Lead to Growth and Development

The coaches expressed the underlying belief that individuals must go through hard things to reach their potential. This theme highlights the ingrained belief in coaches that experiencing and overcoming hard things is beneficial for growth and development, particularly in sport. In addition, the coaches elaborated on how trauma can transform athletes' beliefs/values, motivation, and important relationships as well as how they intentionally create challenges for their athletes based on the belief that hard things are needed to reach full athletic potential.

As noted in previous themes, the coaches made a distinction between trauma and other hard things and appeared to generally believe that trauma is not necessary for athletic success but the ability to navigate and overcome hardship is. Participant 5 described his belief that development in athletics must be difficult as a matter of course:

> This is a high performance based business. So, we're going to need to perform at a high level, and we're not going to fluff things around. We're going to be straight and direct. We're going to be authentic to who we are, and we are going to encourage them [athletes] to do the same thing. But you gotta strive for excellence. It's gotta be hard It can't be easy. And that's just the way it is.

Participant 10 elaborated on her perception of how hard things lead to growth with an analogy involving building muscles:

> We lift weights so that we have increased resistance that breaks the muscle down. When it rebuilds, it gets bigger and stronger and faster and quicker. So, weights create adversity for your muscles to help them grow. That's not necessarily a negative. We want all athletes to get bigger, faster, stronger. Be fit, but in a healthy way. So, to me, that's a small physiological example of intentionally breaking down something to build something up and make it better. That makes sense to me.

Participant 7 also explained the relationship between experiencing hard things and performing in sport at a high level. For him, it is important that athletes be prepared for the traumatic or challenging events and use those experiences as learning opportunities:

> Life comes at you fast, and you have to prepared for those adverse moments. We all love to think that the next day is going to be the same, and you can wake up happy and do the things that you love. But often times those traumatic events get in the way of that. And that adversity, and what you can learn from those experiences should help you perform better, both mentally and physically, and return to competition and do the things that you love. I think sport and going

> through adversity and challenging times are certainly important, and we teach that as our staff. We talk about that on a daily basis, about put yourself in uncomfortable moments and learn from them to come out the other side a better athlete and a better person.

He proceeded to give an example of how dealing with adversity in sport prepares athletes for "real life" adversities:

> These athletes they get out into the real world and then something like the Coronavirus happens. Hopefully, their experiences of losing a tough match or tearing an ACL, not being able to compete, or losing a family member during this season or something like that would help them deal with adversity in moments of real life.

Additionally, Participant 8 explained how being able to overcome adversity is important for individual success as well as for the betterment of the team:

> If you come to college, we have all high school [position players], and there's only one of them that plays [position]. So you better have some competitive juices. You better be tough You better be able to overcome some adversity. You better be able to work your butt off to be a starting [position player]. You better have a high -level work ethic and be really, really driven to be the main person. And in the end, you're going to make everyone else around you better.

Finally, Participant 3 offered an example of an athlete who had to overcome adversity and became a very successful athlete, highlighting the exceptional nature of this example and implying that success reached after overcoming adversity is more meaningful:

> And this, her story is so special because she's had so much adversity. She's overcome so much this year. And to see her finally succeed, to see this happen for her, you know, honestly, it brings tears to my eyes just to think about it. And I was like, 'My gosh! Wow! How awesome is that! I didn't know that.' An athlete goes from maybe being third in our conference to being third in the country. And it's just like wow! How inspirational is that?

Subtheme #5a – Trauma Transforms Athletes' Beliefs/Values, Motivation, and Relationships

A few coaches outlined how trauma may lead to growth by acknowledging that trauma may be used as motivation, change one's perspective, and alter one's priorities (e.g., prioritizing relationships that are maintained through sport). For example, Participant 5 stated matter-of-factly that "finding out how to overcome adversity is a direct link to success; it's gotta be." He added the following about the transformative nature of trauma:

> Well, I think what it teaches you is that you are tougher than what you think you are. We as an individual, we put a shield around ourselves at some point. When you're really, really pushed to the max in an absolute hard situation, I think you're finding out that you're way stronger than you ever thought you could be. And that's what you're finding out the most. You can overcome a lot more than you thought.

Several coaches described how trauma may increase motivation and help move athletes toward sport. Participant 4 made a connection between increased focus on sport and success when he noted, "I think that the trauma could, from my perspective, lead to

focus on the sport. And that focus on that sport is what propels them on." Additionally, Participant 8 elucidated this notion by offering another example of how trauma may be a source of motivation to succeed in sport:

> You look and see the places they grew up in, and it's a tough place where they grew up. And getting out is probably what fuels them the most. Is that traumatic? Is that trauma? You know, the guys that grew up around adversity? Did they see traumatic things? Sure, yeah. What fuels them? I think what fuels them is just like, 'I want to get the hell out of here.'

Furthermore, Participant 8 gave a specific example of how experiencing the many losses that accompany adversity (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) might influence motivation in the future as well:

> I think a lot of positive things can be taken out of this. Some guys are back home. They are with their families. They're appreciating their family time more. They're appreciating the opportunity to have a good education and be on campus, just to be with their friends and teammates and have a student-athlete life. They can appreciate the hard that comes with being a student-athlete and not take that for granted. And I think the way kids will use this as motivation in a good way.

Participant 3 also described how athletes may utilize the shared adversity of the COVID-19 pandemic for motivation:

> I think this is interesting, because even as you ask this question, my brain started turning. My main thing going into this upcoming year, if we get this year will be, 'Listen guys, you never know when something's taken away from us. So, let's not assume that I have this next [competition] or I have this next season or I have this

> next year.' We've all been through this now. We know that it's not promised for tomorrow, whether it's COVID, whether it's a car accident, who knows what. So, from here on out, let's train and go through each day and each [competition] as if we don't have tomorrow.

A few coaches discussed how hard things may transform important relationships connected to sport and influence an athlete's participation in sport, thus leading to higher commitment. Participant 2 illustrated this idea with the following comments:

> If [sport] was something that they had a bond with or a connection from that parent, or they felt closer inspired or connected to their parent because of that, and that is something that they continually went to in a positive way, they could positively promote that sixth-grader's relationship to the sport because it creates that unique bond with their parent who's no longer there. And it could provide further motivation during tough times, or just that wanting and willingness to continue to have that relationship with a parent who's no longer there.

Subtheme #5b – Coaches Intentionally Challenge Athletes

Based on their belief that challenges, adversity, and obstacles help athletes grow, the coaches appeared to express their desire to intentionally challenge their athletes in particular ways both on and off the playing field. For example, Participant 9 commented that challenging athletes is necessary to be successful stating, "Oh, you have to do that on a daily basis in your practice. I think if your practice is not just as hard or harder than the game, I don't know if your team can be successful." In addition, Participant 10 made an important distinction between intentionally creating trauma and intentionally challenging athletes:

> I would never want to have a student-athlete where I was like, 'I'm going to create a traumatic experience for you. I'm going to cross boundaries, I'm going to create emotional distress, I'm going to increase your stress levels to the point that you have to learn how to work through anxiety.' I'm not going to intentionally create trauma. But I am going to intentionally create adverse situations which develop the athlete's mind, body, spirit. They can adapt and adjust when something unexpected happens.

Many coaches described physical challenges, such as increasing number of repetitions of weights or a particular skill or pushing athletes to physical limitations. Additionally, many coaches described challenging athletes with developing mental skills or a mindset that they view as facilitative to performance. For example, Participant 4 described the way he challenges his athletes by giving them an opportunity to practice in a variety of outdoor conditions:

> I was always trying to toughen the guys up. They would always whine and complain, 'It's cold out here' or 'It's raining."' Blah, blah, blah. But, I always thought that the more you practice and the more that you prepare yourself for conditions, then that's kind of something in you that you need to do.

Participant 8 also described how he challenges his athletes and the need for these challenges to be difficult:

> You got to make practice hard on them. You got to put them in situations where they are going to fail, whether it be hard drills or hard game situations. Or teach them and talk to them about their game knowledge and experiences and their failures, because you got to make practice as hard as you can.

Participant 5 described how it is important to mimic pressure in practice scenarios and to present this pressure as something that will develop skill:

> Well, when you know that you're going to get into something intense you say, 'Okay, listen, this is going to be hard today. How tough are you? Can you expand your celling, and can you expand your limits of how tough you can be?' And, so, you bark at them to see how they respond. And if they get a little sensitive about it, then you got to talk to them about it, 'Hey, listen, we're not doing this. It's not personal. It's just trying to help you be a better player.' And we work on helping them understand those things.

Lastly, Participant 10 described how it is important to communicate to athletes the purpose of providing challenges:

> It's going to feel really difficult. And you're going to get frustrated, and you're going to work through it. And I'm going to push you in it, and I'm going to challenge you in it. It's not going to feel comfortable, but it is going to make game day easy. And, being clear about that, being able to communicate that and frame that so that the kids understand. And sometimes you pick not to always frame it or sometimes you do something creative or intuitive in the process. And that's where sometimes you got to clean up the mess later (laughs) or at the end of practice or at a [break].

Theme #6 – Hard Things are not Sufficient for Growth; Other Pieces to the Puzzle are Needed

The coaches acknowledged that there are many factors needed for athletic success beyond experiencing trauma and even hard things. Although many coaches were unsure

that trauma was necessary for sport success, they were able to identify other factors that they believe are needed. The subthemes of social support, coping, environmental factors, and individual athlete traits illuminate the nuances identified by the coaches and the complexity of the relationship between trauma and sport success.

Participant 5 provided a useful metaphor for this theme when he described the path to success as a "road." He stated that there are circumstances that can detour athletes on their journey to success and implied that there are things that can help them get back on track that goes beyond experiencing trauma:

> Alright, so if you're looking at a road. You're on this road You're going to travel this road to get to this specific place. You're going to run into a series of dramatic events that are going to detour you off of this road, but you got to find your way back. And some along this journey, I would assume, are going to get detoured and never find their way back to it. But the ones that do, wow. That's pretty good. The bigger the detour, the longer or the harder or the more difficult it is for them to get back to the road.

Participant 6 offered some additional context when he discussed two professional athletes, Michael Jordan and Dennis Rodman, that had very different backgrounds and ended up being teammates in the NBA. These athletes were part of the Chicago Bulls teams that won several NBA Championships. He acknowledged that there are many things that may influence how one reaches athletic success:

> So, I think in [Michael Jordan's] case, it comes down to the drive that his family had just to be over achievers in their life, whether it's just a certain type of job or being a professional athlete. I don't think they were telling him that in the sense of

> ‘Well, we want you to play in the NBA and the only way to get there is X, Y, and Z.’ It was just, ‘Hey, you had a setback. Now it’s time to start working harder.’ Where in Dennis Rodman’s case (laughs), there was no guidance whatsoever when he was growing up. But the difference was ‘If you’re not going to get a job, now you’re on your own.” So, in a way, it was the same type of kick in the butt, it was just a hell of a lot harsher of a way to do it.

Additionally, several participants noted that trauma can have many outcomes and that it does not necessarily lead to success, suggesting that there must be other factors that contribute to the relationship between trauma and sport success. Participant 2 made a connection between how one perceives trauma and the outcomes these different perceptions may lead to:

> If you’re assuming a sixth grader is losing a parent at a very young age, at a more unexpected age, so to speak, I think it could definitely impact that person in the negative. It could make them depressed or make them very confused. They don’t have the maturing to understand the emotions that they’re going through. Maybe they just bottle it up and bury it. Maybe they’re oblivious to it, and it comes out later. I mean, there are so many different scenarios, so I think that it could affect them negatively.

Participant 8 also observed that there are potentially many different outcomes to trauma including negative ones.

> I don’t think there needs to be trauma in somebody’s life in order to be successful. It can fuel you, but it can also ruin your career. If you’re dealing with a traumatic experience in life, there are plenty of guys that have not had any trauma, or

> dealing with nothing and having a great situation but very successful. I don't really know that necessarily (pause, sigh), I don't think you have to have it to be a successful athlete, no.

Subtheme #6a – Social Support

The coaches identified social support, both from sources within sport and outside of sport, as an important contributor to athletic success. The coaches also discussed situations where social support is critical, particularly when dealing with trauma. For example, Participant 9 explained why social support is important:

> You can't do life all by yourself. You got to have people that can help you. You have to be able to ask for help and feel like you have a support system. So, I think that's very important because some kids have a support system at home, but you have to really want them to feel like they have a support system once they come to college.

Participant 8 also described how he creates space for athletes to receive support:

> It's just knowing that you're there for them every single day. We support them every day. If they call you, are you there for them? When they need extra work, whether it be early in the morning, late at night, whenever, you're accessible to them. You got to show that you're there for them. That's the biggest thing. Are you present? I think that's the biggest thing. I'm always at the office, so our guys know that I'm always here for them for anything. So that's a big part of it.

The coaches were asked if they have coached an athlete that has experienced trauma and to expand on how they approach coaching that athlete. Participant 9 offered a

story of an athlete who learned of the death of a close family member during a post-competition meeting:

> Our head coach precedes to call his dad and said, 'Hey, you know, I'm going to call your dad. He wants to talk to you real quick.' But he knew it was something different because normally when your dad wants to talk to you, he just calls you on your phone. So, he shared that information, and the kid was heart-broken. But I thought that the best thing for him was that he had a support system. His two best friends on the team were there. The whole coaching staff was there. So, he actually had people that could hold him up when he was crying. I mean, he was crushed. I mean, this was a guy he was really close to, and, he was just crushed. But, we were able to help him, and we didn't let him hit the floor while he was crying. We held him up. That's what a support system is for.

Participant 2 described his approach to coaching athletes who have experienced trauma in the following way:

> So, how does that maybe change the way I coach them on the short term? I tell them, 'let's approach practice a little different,' and I give them a choice a lot of times if they're struggling or something is happening, I say 'Look, [sport] is not the most important thing today.' If being here for practice is a stressor or a negative in your life right now, then get away from it. But a lot of times, sometimes [sport] is a comfort because it's a known. It's something that's familiar, and it can actually serve as a distraction. And so, I give them that option.

Every coach described the importance of creating and building a relationship with their athletes where athletes feel comfortable coming to them for support. Participant 10 expanded on this notion in the following way:

> When you have a good coach- athlete relationship and you can make a read that their performance isn't going well or they're mentality not believing in what they're capable of doing, then that's where you got to work that space too. 'Hey, listen, maybe I pushed too hard yesterday. Did you reflect on that? How are you feeling about it? Was it the wrong approach? How do we get back on the same page? I'm here to help you be the best. Maybe today's a good day to catch you and encourage you and balance out that communication so you're aware that I see both your strengths and your weaknesses.

The coaches emphasized being a good listener, creating an open and welcoming environment, and putting effort into getting to know athletes individually so that they can know how best to support them when they are experiencing hard things. Participant 5 expressed his belief that being able to listen was paramount to being supportive:

> Number one support, I think for any coach in this age group, is the ability to listen. And create a feel that no matter what they're going through, they can talk to you, and at least have the comfort level to say, 'Listen, this is what's going on, and this is where I'm at.' And that's where the community comes in. You got to find strength in numbers, the strength of each other. And so the support is the ability to listen and honesty.

Participant 3 also described how her approach includes providing options for athletes. She shared an example of an athlete who was preparing for an important competition just after the athlete had learned of the death of a family member:

> So, understanding that there were certain things that she needed, but also understanding in order for us to be successful, we're still going to have to do the things we need to do. So, I gave her the choice to decide whether or not she was ready to do that.

The coaches acknowledged that support outside of sport that comes from various individuals may have different outcomes based on who the athlete is and what the athlete may need. For example, Participant 9 outlined the importance of having multiple sources of support:

> Family members, friends, coaches, teachers, administrators. I think having that support system when traumatic things, I think that's important because you don't want to go through that stuff alone and by yourself. You never want to feel like you're alone and can't communicate with other people.

Relatedly, Participant 6 talked about how other important figures in one's life can influence success in sport:

> I think one of them is definitely who has raised you. Who's been around you your whole life. What have you been subject to as far as the people, the coaches, the family members, that type of thing. As far as the people who tend to pave that way for you a little bit.

Participant 3 also shared examples of how social support influences sport success and provided a distinction between social support that may lead to success in sport and social support that may hinder success in sport:

> And one athlete has experienced horrible, horrible trauma from when she was a kid to currently. And she's coddled so much because of it. And they just kind of suffocate her in a sense that she's not able to kind of rise and to mature more because she has so many people around her trying to protect her from anything else happening to her. And then I have another athlete who has experienced the same type of thing. She's experienced trauma before she came to me. She experienced trauma while she was with me, and her support system is sometimes helpful, sometimes not. So, I think the support system plays a big role in it. You can have a situation where the family member or the significant other, whoever is that main link in that athletes' life, become overly sensitive and keep that athlete from figuring things out and rising above the ashes. And then you have the athletes that don't have that, and therefore, they do it on their own.

Subtheme #6b – Coping

The coaches described the importance of having coping skills to mitigate the negative impacts of experiencing trauma. Participant 5 talked about having an optimistic perspective to help get through the challenges that come with participating in sport:

> It's just like when you hear people say I hate to lose more than I like to win. I think that they don't feel any different than I do. It's just their perspective. It's how you look at it. Because it's how you look at it. Is the glass half full or half

> empty? It's the same idea. I'm going to work my tail off until I feel that satisfaction of winning. It's just perspective.

Furthermore, Participant 10 explained how sport can prepare one for coping with difficult things:

> But essentially in sport, we are always working through those emotions. You lose a game, there's a small grieving period sometimes. You win a game, there's a high. So, I think (pause, sigh) we understand working through those emotions.

Additionally, several coaches explored the idea that sport itself can be used as a method of coping with trauma. Participant 2 described this notion when he discussed how he might coach an athlete who has experienced trauma:

> Sometimes they're like, 'I just need to be distracted.' And I would never tell our [athletes] to show up to practice and just go through the motions for two hours. But, once again, perspective is being provided, and [sport] isn't the most important thing. And that can be a positive influence in their life, where it just allows them to get some energy out and kind of distract themselves Then, I've changed the way that I coach that person for the day versus everybody else.

Participant 10 also described sport as a space where an athlete may no longer have to think about or focus on the negative things that have happened in their life:

> I think sometimes when people have experienced traumatic things, (pause), they come to sport, and it's a space that they're free. So, let's say they're an addict or the daughter of an addict. They get to sport, and they don't have to deal with that between the lines. That's not their identity, and it's a place where they don't want to bring that into their sport. They just want to show up and be a kid and be free.

Finally, participant 9 described sport as an opportunity to cope with trauma by describing sport as a "safe place:"

> When you're playing the sport, you get a chance to forget about that trauma. You get a chance to get out and do something physical and really get your frustration out. You get a chance to really focus in, mentally and physically, on something other than your trauma….I wouldn't say a distraction. I would almost say a safe place. Almost like a safe haven where during that time when you're focusing on your sport. You're not even thinking about that because the game is so fast. You don't have time to worry about, 'Oh man, I feel bad. I feel sad. I feel mad." You don't get a chance to feel those emotions while you're playing because the game is so fast, no matter what game you're playing.

While many coaches acknowledged that coping skills were important, they also recognized that coping ability may be different for individuals of different ages. For example, Participant 9 noted that it is "obvious" that younger individuals are not "equipped to handle" trauma in the same way as an older athlete. Furthermore, Participant 7 also acknowledged the difference in coping abilities between young individuals and older individuals:

> So, your mind can always mold and adapt as you get older, but I just think that, when you're a child, you don't know what you don't know. Your mind is still being developed, and a lot of that is through your experiences and those experiences shape you. Whereas, if you're a 65-year-old man or woman and you go through that traumatic event, you would hope that 65 years' worth of experience would come into dealing with those moments of trauma.

Participant 2 emphasized the meaning of the traumatic event and previous individual experiences when describing how coping may be dependent on age:

> But, let's say that sixth grade soccer player just lost a parent. versus the Olympian who might have just lost a parent. Because of the different statuses of their life and just the different age brackets they're in, the Olympian is just naturally, inherently going to be older, wiser, more mature, able to compartmentalize emotions, be able to handle and deal with that, versus a sixth-grader. It doesn't mean one deals with it better or worse, but I think that that trauma placed right in front of them, is going to impact them both differently, and impact their sport performance differently, or potentially the same. I think that they could both handle it, well or poorly, not based on their age, but just based on their own individual experiences. And it could affect that sixth grader's tournament as much as it could affect in positive or negative way, that Olympian's performance.

Subtheme #6c – Environmental Factors

The coaches identified several external influences that impact the relationship between sport success and trauma and the extent to which hard things lead to growth. These factors were largely described as team culture, rules and expectations, and the nature of the sport. Participant 10 discussed how her team has established a culture where athletes are empowered to take ownership of their own care:

> Okay, you need a mental health day, you need that day off, the team knows we account for mental health days, and it's a non-conversation. So, if somebody doesn't show up to practice, it's not like we're going to be "Oh, Sally-Jean's not here, she's taking a mental health day." We just know that sometimes people are

> here and sometimes people aren't. And that's on that student to engage in communication with their teammates as to why they're there or not, you But the team needs to trust that the coaching staff and the individuals are going to make decisions that are in the best interest of that person within the context of the team.

Participant 5 also described the importance of establishing a team culture that is the foundation for how a team handles adversity and challenges:

> Well, I think when the situation becomes more complicated, (pause), then I think you need to make it easier. Now that is, whether it is schematic, or gathering the chess pieces of what's going on, or the environment. If the environment is becoming more complicated due to detours in the road, per say, then you need to dial it back and make it simpler. And that's where we go back to the pillars.

Participant 2 described creating a culture of open communication so that his athletes can talk with him whenever they are experiencing something difficult:

> So, I think you have to be ready to be a support in any role that they need you, that's appropriate in that setting. And that might just be listening, that might be a problem solver, that might be a coach, that might be for their academics, that might be through a tough time or something they're experiencing outside, whether that's mental health or whether it's with family issues or things of that nature. So, I think, once again it's just kind of establishing that environment of being open and available and then allowing them to use that space and use you in that role as they see fit. And not try to put too many parameters on it.

Subtheme #6d – Individual Athlete Traits

The coaches acknowledged that athletes who exhibit certain individual traits (e.g., those who are disciplined, resilient, and talented) are more likely to become successful regardless of whether or not they had experienced trauma. For example, Participant 8 described different factors that he believes athletes must possess in order to be successful:

> Talent, work ethic, toughness, competitiveness, (pause), how you motivate your teammates, leadership skills and you make other people better around you. I think those things are way more important than dealing with a traumatic event.

Participant 4 also described what he believes is necessary for athletes on an individual basis to be successful:

> I've always kind of thought of it as, are you doing the right things? Are you practicing? Are you the one that's mentally tough, are you driven to succeed? Are you, are you the guy who's going to do everything you can to win? Are you at practice a little bit later? Are you going to tough it out?

Participant 3 noted that individual athletes may handle adversity, trauma, and challenges differently and that it depends on the "psychological makeup" of the student-athlete:

> I think some athletes, experience trauma and they use that trauma for the reason why they can't do something and it's just "oh because I know this happened to me, and I know that's not going to work." So, they're not willing to move past that. And then there are some athletes that experience trauma and say, "because of this I know I'm tough enough and I can handle it." And they push past, push well beyond. So, I really think it's just the difference in the athlete.

Finally, Participant 7 acknowledged that there are multiple outcomes for athletes who have experienced trauma and that is unfair for a coach to assume that an athlete may be struggling:

> Let's say a student-athlete walks into the office and they say "Coach, I was young, somebody really close to me passed away and they had a drug addiction, or this and that, and that really affected me." Sometimes I think poor coaches, they think about that, they dwell on that. They think that that person is damaged and in fact, I look at it the exact opposite way. Maybe that person learned through that moment and actually has bettered themselves and is a great place. So I think it puts a little bit of a stigma, on players that they almost have this tag associated with them, that they're going to respond a certain way about this certain topic and often times that's not true at all. You never really know because you're not them.

Chapter 6

Discussion

Summary of Study and Results

The purpose of the present study was to explore coaches' perceptions and beliefs related to how trauma experienced by athletes impacts their sport development as well as the perceived role coaches may play in the trauma-sport success relationship. Previous research has examined how success in sport may be impacted by the experience of trauma but has not specifically investigated how coaches view the trauma-sport success relationship or their role in this relationship. This study attempted to answer two questions: (a) What are coaches' perceptions about the role of trauma, challenges and adversity in creating athletic success? and (b) How do coaches' perceptions of the role of trauma in creating athletic success inform their coaching behaviors. Interviews with 10 NCAA Division I coaches and subsequent interpretivist phenomenological analysis revealed six themes and 10 subthemes related to these questions.

Theme #1, the Relationship between Trauma and Sport Success is Nuanced, captured much of the process of how coaches think about this relationship. The coaches identified thoughts and reactions related to the research indicating that trauma is important for sport success and recognized the variability of outcomes for those who have experienced trauma. A subtheme emerged within theme one, the Necessity of Trauma, which emphasized the overwhelming belief of the coaches that trauma is not necessary for sport success.

Theme #2, Coaching Philosophy Influences How Coaches View the Relationship between Trauma and Sport Success, summarized the coaches' thoughts of how their

underlying beliefs about the role of a coach may influence how they understand the impact of trauma on sport success. For example, several coaches acknowledged that they strive to develop athletes in domains outside of sport, indicating that may consider the balance of the value and consequences of trauma outside of sport. Three subthemes emerged: (a) Coach-Athlete Relationship, (b) Individual Needs in the Coach-Athlete Relationship, and (c) Challenges Relating to Athletes. These subthemes captured how coaches center the coach-athlete relationship within the context of coaching and developing success.

Theme #3, Hard Things, Including Trauma, Adversity, and Challenge, are Inevitable, summarized the notion that many coaches believe athletes will face hard things at some point in time. The term "hard things" was deliberately chosen to capture the entirety of words, such as trauma, obstacle, challenges, that coaches used to capture the idea of how trauma and other difficulties may influence sport success. Coaches utilized examples from their own lives as well as examples of coaching athletes who experienced trauma and challenges before becoming a college athlete and while being a college athlete. Moreover, a few coaches justified the need to practice experiencing challenges due to hard things being unavoidable.

Theme #4, Trauma is Intense, more so than Obstacles/Challenges/Adversity, illustrated the notion that there are differences between events or situations that coaches consider to be traumatic and those they consider challenging. The coaches most often defined trauma as something that is life-threatening or involved abuse, neglect, or violence and had intense emotional or physical consequences. Conversely, the coaches

typically defined challenges as events or situations that had less intense consequences, such as getting injured but returning to sport or not getting a starting position.

Theme #5, Hard Things Lead to Growth and Development, described the views most coaches had in which they believe in the value of experiencing hard things. A few coaches cited examples of how experiencing hard things prepares athletes for the challenges that they will inevitably face. Two subthemes emerged: (a) Trauma Transforms Athletes' Beliefs/Values, Motivation, and Relationships and (b) Coaches Intentionally Challenge Athletes. The first subtheme highlights what coaches believe to be the process of how challenges lead to growth and development, while the second subtheme elucidates the reasoning behind why coaches make it a point to challenge their athletes.

Finally, Theme #6, Hard Things are not Sufficient for Growth; Other Pieces to the Puzzle are Needed, summarized beliefs the coaches held regarding what else contributes to success outside of experiencing hard things. This theme contained four subthemes: (a) Social Support, (b) Coping, (c) Environmental Factors, and (d) Individual Athlete Traits. Each subtheme highlighted the different examples coaches gave of other factors that contribute to athletic success.

Discussion of Study's Main Findings

There are several main points taken from the results of the study highlighted in the sections below. First and foremost, coaches generally do not believe that trauma is necessary for athletes to be successful. However, coaches made a distinction between trauma and less severe and intense negative circumstances that they described as adversity, challenges, or obstacles and offered other factors that contribute to athletic

success. Second, coaches largely believed that experiencing hard things *is* necessary in order for athletes to be successful due to the inherent belief that hard things lead to growth and development. Finally, coaches recognized the impact they have on athletic success by providing support and challenges for their athletes.

Trauma is not Necessary for Success in Sport

The coaches largely stated that trauma is not necessary for athletic success. Even though there was some variability in what coaches considered trauma, most coaches considered events that are life-threatening to self or others or abuse and neglect as trauma, while only some coaches considered events like experiencing a parents' divorce or loss of identity as trauma. Additionally, many coaches acknowledged that individual perceptions would influence whether or not something is considered traumatic. The coaches made distinctions between trauma and other events described as challenges, obstacles, and adversities. They gave examples of adjusting to life as a college athlete, being injured, not making a team, or not having a great performance as the type of events that are hard, but less intense than trauma.

Coaches recognized that there are many factors that contribute to whether or not someone is successful, regardless of whether or not they have experienced trauma. Coaches discussed other factors such as receiving social support, having effective coping skills, environmental factors, and individual athlete characteristics that are all important to athletic success. Furthermore, coaches largely identified these factors as alternatives to experiencing trauma for being successful in sport.

The claim that the coaches made related to the necessity of trauma is a topic of some controversy within the literature. Hardy et al. (2017) argued for a causal link

between experiencing a negative life event, which they described as more akin to how coaches in this sample described trauma, and experiencing success as a "super-elite" athlete. Sarkar and Fletcher (2017) claimed that trauma is necessary to reach the highest levels of sport, such as the Olympics, and they further argued that other psychosocial skills are not enough on their own to distinguish an athlete as superior. This runs counter to what coaches in this sample reported and what other researchers have purported (Hodges et al., 2017; Krakauer, 2017). Several coaches discussed the need for other skills, mindsets, and talents that are needed for athletic success. Additionally, Hardy et al. claimed that traits such as ruthlessness, selfishness, obsessiveness, and perfectionism were developed through experiencing these negative life events. Coaches in this sample did not identify these types of traits as necessary for sport success, at least at the college level.

The coaches' recognition of the nuance of defining trauma also is reflected in the research. Collins and MacNamara (2016) stated that trauma includes surprise conditioning tests, something that most coaches in this sample would likely define as a challenge. Furthermore, other researchers have called for more deliberate and intentional definitions of trauma so that there is clarity in terms of what types of traumatic or challenging events can be linked to success (Howells, et al., 2017; Kerr& Stirling, 2015).

In addition, research and theory support the observations the coaches shared regarding the role of other factors deemed important for sport success. There has been a substantial amount of research in sport regarding the outcomes of coping (see Nicholls, Taylor, Carroll, & Perry, 2016 and Tamminen, 2021 for reviews), individual traits (Kegelaers & Wylleman 2018; Piepiora, 2020; Raglin, 2001) and environmental factors

(Fletcher & Arnold, 2017; Kim & Cruz, 2016) on performance and well-being. Furthermore, theory and research examining what contributes to post-traumatic growth also accounts for similar factors (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009; Tedeshci & Calhoun, 2004). Prati and Pietrantoni (2009) conducted a meta-analysis which revealed that coping, social support, and optimism were significantly correlated to post-traumatic growth, and the authors indicated that it is likely these factors aid in the development of post-traumatic growth. Moreover, John et al. (2019) conducted a study examining athletes and musicians and the antecedents to talent development, including trauma, and found that type of coping strategy impacted growth outcomes and talent development. Finally, Organismic Valuing Theory (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Joseph, 2009) states that growth originates from the person and their context more so than the traumatic event itself, implying that individual characteristics are important.

Hard Things are Inevitable and Lead to Growth

While the coaches expressed the belief that trauma was not necessary for sport success, they collectively believed that it is important for athletes to experience hard things to grow and develop on and off the athletic field. Furthermore, the coaches stated that hard things, which could include trauma, are inevitable. Along these lines, coaches connected this inevitability to the belief that it is better to be prepared to address hard things rather than be unprepared and unable to cope with it. This was often used as a justification for why it is important for coaches to challenge athletes.

The coaches underscored how experiencing hard things may transform athletes' beliefs and values, motivation, and relationships. This finding is supported in research examining the outcomes of college athletes experiencing hard things. For example, Galli

and Reel (2012b) noted that college athletes reported growth after experiencing challenging things and not necessarily traumatic things such that they felt more resilient, confident, and self-reliant. In another study, Galli and Reel (2012a) interviewed college athletes and found that they reported greater appreciation for life and their sport, reprioritization of values, and a greater connection to others after experiencing non-traumatic challenges. In addition, Joseph and Linley (2005) theoretically outlined how changes in previously held beliefs are necessary to experience post-traumatic growth. They explain that trauma shatters previous assumptions of the world and the process of accommodation allows for individuals to make meaning of their traumatic experiences and develop new beliefs that lead to growth. These new beliefs often facilitate growth towards authenticity, which positively impacts motivation, relationships, and subjective well-being (Joseph & Linley, 2005).

Coaches did not give specific examples of what growth is but alluded to growth leading to better coping skills and better performance. The lack of specific examples is common within the literature and has led to research on illusory growth, or the unsubstantiated belief based in wishful thinking that one has grown (Howells, & Fletcher, 2006; Maercker & Zoellner, 2004). Illusory growth is contrasted with constructive growth, which consists of deliberate reflection and active coping strategies. Howells and Fletcher (2006) found that illusory growth may be beneficial if it leads to constructive growth later, whereby wishful thinking creates comfort before the hard work of meaning making begins. Meaning making is an important part of accommodating new beliefs, which is important for experiencing constructive growth (Joseph and Linley, 2005).

The Importance of Providing Support to Athletes

The coaches identified different ways in which they provide support for their athletes including, being available, listening to athletes, offering advice, and helping athletes get connected to other resources. These were largely talked about in the context of the coach-athlete relationship. The coaches often described how being supportive to their athletes is crucial for athlete well-being and their performance. Furthermore, most coaches expressed their desire to develop athletes beyond the realm of sport and noted that having a supportive relationship with athletes aids this. The coaches' perceived importance of providing support is consistent with previous research that has established how athletes often turn to coaches as a source of social support during times of stress. For example, Davis and Jowett (2010) found that coaches satisfy basic attachment functions, suggesting that coaches may provide a secure base for athletes. Howells and Fletcher (2016) found that swimmers would often converse with important others, including coaches, regarding their feelings about challenges they have experienced as part of the growth process.

Several coaches discussed how they provide support by actively engaging in relationship with athletes. They emphasized the importance of creating an open environment where difficult discussions are normalized, individual needs of athletes are understood, and athletes are given choice regarding how they may cope with trauma (i.e. letting them decide if/how they will participate in practice). Kegelaers and Wylleman (2018) interviewed elite coaches and observed that a high-quality and flexible coach-athlete relationship conformed to individual needs was important to have to foster resilience. In addition, social support has been identified as an important component of

post-traumatic growth in several different theories (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Joseph et al., 2012). Furthermore, Organismic Valuing Theory outlines the importance of individuals experiencing autonomy, relatedness, and competence to move toward their own valuing process, thus leading to growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005).

The Benefit of Challenging Athletes

Coaches also perceived their role as one of challenging their athletes. Many coaches described providing physical challenges, such as increasing number of repetitions of weights or a particular skill or pushing athletes to physical limitations. Additionally, many coaches described challenging athletes with developing mental skills or a mindset that they view as facilitative to performance. As noted above, many coaches believe that challenges lead to better coping skills and better performance. Additionally, coaches identified challenges, adversity, and obstacles as less intense or severe as trauma. When coaches discussed the ways that they challenge their athletes, many of them further highlighted differences from trauma in that their challenges are intentional, purposeful, controlled, and directly related to the sport or the experience of being a student.

According to Collins and MacNamara (2012, 2017) utilizing challenges in these ways is best practice. From their perspective, the systematic training through challenge with the appropriate supports is more likely to lead to resilience, and they noted that just because hard things happen, it does not mean that growth will occur. Other researchers appear to agree as there are many programs that have been created for the general population with the intent to build resilience, grit, mental toughness, and the like (Joyce, Shand, Tighe, Laruent, Bryant, & Harvey, 2018). Joyce et al., (2018) conducted a meta-

analysis examining the effectiveness of resilience training programs with adults and found a moderate positive correlation between receiving training and increased resilience.

Implications for Practice

This study has important implications for practice, particularly how coaches and sport organizations may engage with athletes. Coaches largely rejected the idea that trauma is necessary for sport success. This appears to be good news as college coaches may be more likely to understand the complexity and nuance of developing athletic talent and may be less likely to take the claims that trauma is necessary for success as face value, leading to harmful coaching behaviors. Coaches may benefit from education and interventions targeting coaching behaviors that might not appear to be traumatic. Stirling and Kerr (2015) noted that while coaches do not wish to cause harm, they may be unaware of the negative emotional impact they cause by challenging athletes when they ridicule or belittle them, ignore them, or lose emotional control. Several of the coaches in this sample acknowledged that they do not always find the right balance of supporting or challenging their athletes.

Coaches recognized that trauma is inevitable, and growing research suggests that if trauma is not inevitable, it is a least very common (Felitti et al, 1998). This has many implications in that it is likely coaches will coach individuals who have experienced trauma, and it is important that coaches understand the impact of these experiences on individuals. As coaches have important influence on their athletes, it becomes more critical that coaches are prepared to work with athletes with a variety of histories and outcomes related to trauma. Furthermore, environmental and team culture factors are largely outside of the individual athletes' control. Thus, interventions aimed at helping

coaches create trauma-informed team cultures and supportive coaching behaviors would be beneficial.

Additionally, sport itself may be a coping mechanism as it provides opportunities for individuals to feel competent, learn coping strategies, and receive social support (Howells, Sarkar, & Fletcher, 2017; Kampman & Hefferon, 2020;). Indeed, sport as a treatment modality, based in trauma-informed care, has been a burgeoning area of research (Altieri, Rooney, Bergholz, & McCarthy, 2021; Bergholz, Stafford, & D'Andrea, 2016; D'Andrea, Bergholz, Fortunato, & Spinazzola, 2013). For example, D'Andrea et al. (2013) developed trauma-informed sport programming for youth in a residential treatment facility and found positive outcomes on mental health and well-being. Part of these results may also be contributed to the careful training of sport personnel in the principles of trauma-informed care and how they are operationalized in sport. This may have implications for how trauma-informed principles may be integrated into already existing sport organizations such as school, university, and professional sport teams.

This research is perhaps timely given the recent and ongoing COVID-19 health crisis. Many coaches viewed the health crisis as an opportunity for growth, aligning with the belief that good can come from hard things. However, it may be important to help coaches understand that there may be a variety of experiences and mental health outcomes as a result. Furthermore, offering coaches information about how to best support their athletes will be crucial. One participant likened COVID-19 to his experience of coaching athletes who have lost loved ones in the September 11th attacks of the World Trade Centers in New York City in 2001. He recognized that everyone was

impacted differently by that event and that the ramifications of the event were long lasting, noting that his players were very young when it happened, but still impacted them as young adults.

Implications for Research

The results indicated several areas for future research. Future research is needed to illuminate when and how growth occurs from trauma, challenges, and adversity, and how coaches may be a part of the process. Several studies have attempted to clarify these relationships, but more is warranted (Collins & MacNamara, 2012, 2017; Kegelaers & Wylleman, 2018). Specifically, additional research examining the balance of providing support and offering challenges to athletes would help clarify how these processes lead to athletic development and success.

Additionally, the coaches in the present study appeared to have a lay understanding of what trauma is, and this may have important implications for how researchers define and disseminate information. For example, it is imperative that researchers are very clear in how they define trauma and that the definition survives through the distillation process that often occurs between academic research publications and resources that end up in front of coaches. Perhaps future researchers can reach a general consensus on what trauma is and is not and continue to promote terms such as stress-related growth, growth following adversity, and similar concepts.

Furthermore, more research examining sport and gender differences in the development of posttraumatic growth is warranted. Galli and Reel (2012b) found gender differences in reported coping styles and growth outcomes of collegiate athletes. Moreover, Kegelaers and Wylleman (2018) noted that resilience may have gendered

connotations, as words such as “tough,” “strong,” and “power” are more masculine, and this may impact how resilience is operationalized. Stirling and Kerr (2015) noted that type of sport may influence strategies use to challenge athletes. For example, more aggressive sports, such as football, may be more accepting of more aggressive coaching techniques.

Limitations of Study

The current study is not without its limitations. First, these results should be viewed most appropriately as a beginning understanding of how coaches at the college level interpret the impact of trauma on sport success. However, there may be some sport contexts, such as highly competitive high school or adolescent elite leagues, that match college level athletics more closely in competitiveness, resources, and culture. Future researchers should consider the population and context when exploring further questions related to the impact of trauma on sport success.

Second, only one method of data collection was used. While this may have had limited impact on data gathering for coaches’ perceptions regarding the impact of trauma on sport success, it may have impacted the reliability of coaches reporting how they support and challenge their athletes. Day and Wadey (2017) recommend utilizing multiple methods of data gathering in post-traumatic growth research as a way of providing context. Future research should utilize such things as observations and/or multiple interviews. Furthermore, some coaches may have been influenced by social desirability. It is possible that coaches may be hesitant to endorse trauma, which is often considered harmful, as a necessary component of success.

Third, the interviews were conducted via telephone due to governmental restrictions and guidelines on social distancing due to COVID-19. While telephone interviews were sufficient, it limited the ability of the interviewer to collect relevant field notes to note nonverbal communication, as consistent with IPA methodology (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Furthermore, phone connections were not as clear and made it difficult to record and transcribe interviews.

Conclusion

Coaches largely recognized that life, and particularly life in sport, is full of challenges, adversity, and sometimes trauma. They also recognized that there are many factors that may contribute to how one deals with hard things in life, while also observing that growth and development can come from experiencing hard things. Importantly, coaches recognize that there is a great deal of context that must be considered when determining if and how experiencing hard things lead to desirable outcomes. Relatedly, coaches recognize that the relationships they develop with their athletes will impact how athletes experience trauma, whether that is through providing social support, or if that is stretching the limits of what athletes are capable of to enhance skills. It is perhaps encouraging to know that coaches are mindful of how they relate to their athletes and desire to be supporters and shapers of their athletes' lives for the benefit of the athletes. While the negative impacts of trauma should not be underestimated, more research on how coaches, parents, sport administrators and organizations can find balance between providing challenge and providing support for athletes will have beneficial outcomes for everyone involved in sport.

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Demographics:

1. Age, gender, race/ethnicity
2. How long have you been coaching?
    a. Education level
3. Which coaching position do you currently have (head coach or assistant?)
4. What level of sport are you currently coaching? (i.e. NCAA Division I or III)

Coaching Beliefs- General

5. What is your coaching philosophy?
6. What is the role that you play in your athletes' lives?
    a. What are your relationships like with your athletes?

Beliefs about Trauma and Sport Success:

1. When you hear the word "trauma," what comes to mind?
2. One definition of trauma is an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting negative effects on the individuals' functioning and well being. Some believe that trauma is necessary in order for athletes to be successful.
3. What do you think about the link between trauma and sport success?
    a. If there is a link, why is there a link?
    b. If not, why not?
    c. Does athletic level (youth, high school, college, professional, Olympic) matter in the relationship between trauma and sport success?

i. Is it important at any, all, or some of these levels?

4. Do you think type of trauma makes a difference in sport success? For example, experiencing the loss of a parent at 10 years old vs. not making the varsity team at 16 years old?

Coaching Behaviors

So I just asked you about your thoughts about trauma and sport success, and now I want to know how those thoughts, might impact your coaching behavior.

1. How do your thoughts about trauma and sport success influence the way you coach?
    a. In what ways do you challenge your athletes?
    b. In what ways do you provide support athletes?
2. Have you been aware of an athlete you have coached that has experienced trauma from a significant life event (give example if needed)
    a. **If yes:** Tell me about how you approach coaching them.
    b. **If no:** Can you imagine for a moment that you do have an athlete who has experienced trauma from a significant life event? How would you coach them?
    c. Would you treat them differently? How?
3. How might the COVID-19 health crisis impact the way you approach coaching incoming athletes in the future?

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

VERBAL CONSENT DOCUMENTATION FOR PARTICIPATION.

SUBJECT: Exploring Coaches' Perceptions of the Role of Trauma in Sport Success

Oral consent serves as an assurance that the required elements of informed consent have been presented orally to the participant or the participant's legally authorized representative.

Verbal consent to participate in this telephone survey has been obtained by the participant's willingness to continue with the telephone survey by providing answers to a series of questions related to what the participant has heard about the relationship between trauma and sport success.

I attest that the aforementioned written consent has been orally presented to the human subject and the human subject provided me with an oral assurance of their willingness to participate in the research.

Surveyor's Name (Printed)	Surveyor

Phone Script

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Liz Sanborn from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to explore coaches' perceptions about the role of trauma in sport success and how these perceptions may influence coaching behaviors. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her Doctoral Dissertation.

This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants over the telephone. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to the relationship between early life trauma and success in sport.

Participation in this study will require 60 minutes of your time.

We do not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life). The nature of this study is such that you may recall unpleasant memories from your own life. You are under no obligation to share your own personal experiences with trauma or other negative life experiences. This study is interested in your general beliefs about how trauma may impact sport development and how your role as a coach intersects with athletes who may have experienced trauma.

Participation in this study does not have any direct benefits. However, the goal of the study is to provide nuance to the research about the relationship between trauma and sport success. This nuance is important when considering how sport policy and coaching education may evolve from this research.

The results of this research will be presented at a dissertation defense. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. We retain the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, data will be presented in aggregate form. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to us, the researchers. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up your with your answers including audio recordings, will be destroyed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Do you have any questions about the study, your participation, or your rights as a participant?

Do you give consent to be audio recorded during your interview?

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